

ANGEL WINGS

In *ANGEL WINGS*, what of it is truth and what fiction? The writer would claim it is all truth. He would claim that to enter into the mind of persons is a legitimate exercise. Man has an empathic power. He senses other persons. This is why we delight to hear stories.

How many of Jesus' parables and stories were based upon factual happenings? We do not know; yet who debates the reality of the Prodigal Son, or the Good Samaritan? Those stories live as though they were real, historic persons.

In this volume, written for entertainment and thoughtfulness, are stories, every one of which is based upon actual persons and factual happenings. *ANGEL WINGS* is very much a human document, and a warm one at that. Not only is it easy reading, but it is gripping writing. You will be surprised how these stories will imprint themselves upon your memory and be there, perhaps, when you may have need of them.

GEOFFREY BINGHAM is well equipped to bring the truth to us through his story-writing, for he has been at this skill for over fifty years. He has a genius for discerning and communicating the uniqueness and character of human beings.

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New Creation Publications Inc.

Geoffrey C. Bingham

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*Angel wings. beating my face,
Forcing me into grace.*

*Dear eyes, loving my soul,
Drawing me to the goal*

*Strong Word, piercing my brain,
Bringing me holy shame.*

*Pain's cry, welling within,
Lifting me out of sin.*

*Red hands, clotted with blood,
Thrusting me up to God.*

G. Bingham
Changi P.O.W. Camp
1943

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

It is gratifying to know that the first edition of *Angel Wings* sold so quickly. Also it is even more gratifying to know that so many enjoyed reading it. The feedback for the most part was encouraging. Readers not only said they enjoyed it but that they were deeply moved by the message that came through the character studies and true-life stories.

This new and revised edition contains all that was in the former printing, and that material has been re-edited. To it has been added three more stories and a number of poems. The format, too, is more pleasing, making the book easier to handle and read.

There are more ways of sharing truth with readers than confronting them baldly with it. We are all aware—somewhere in our beings—of the truth of truth, but its demands are so strong that we seek to avoid facing it. Truth, however, is never apart from love, and love understands man in his need and is pleased to come to us in many varied ways and forms. Although the content of truth never changes, its communication is always adaptive.

It is in that thought that this new edition is sent out, and I trust that we will be caught by the truth which is no less forceful in its wooing than in its witness.

*Geoffrey Bingham
Coromandel, April 1983*

INTRODUCTION

An Essay on the Short Story

We all love a good story. Some of us revel in the telling of it; some in listening to it. Imperishable is the memory of my own children—six of them—as they listened nightly to the stories I told them. They would sit, wonder-eyed. Neither they nor I knew what the next exciting incident would be! Half-reality, half-fantasy—that was a delightful mixture.

Those years are gone and now my offspring tell stories to their own children.

What is it then which makes us love stories, both in the telling and the hearing? Why is it that imagination is at its best and freest in the telling of fiction?

For children, stories provide a way to learn about ideas and action. Through them, they are also virtually told that there is no place in this world for dry literalism or deadening realism. Fantasy is a way of developing the visual mind, and giving life to what would be otherwise mere facts or dull incidents.

I have, however, discovered that there is even more to it than a deliberate heightening of delight or a stimulation of the adrenalin gland. It is the fact of the surprising nature of man which quickens interest and brings immense pleasure. Man, of course, is a special creature. His goodness is stunningly wonderful; his evil incredibly horrible. Each story teller and story-listener has affinity—at least in imagination—with others of the human race. He can be delighted by rich accomplishments. stung into anger by injustice, terrified by mystery. awed by the noumenous. and shocked by the blackness of evil. Stories call out his emotions, and at

depth and for the most part, man is an emotional creature. He has great powers of empathy.

Fiction, then, is a way of talking about reality. Reality—at least to pragmatic man—is the world about him; the flora, the fauna, and man himself. Man generally wants to know reality but then not in a dry, factual, literalistic manner. He appreciates the team of writers which works for him. They stimulate his imagination. They give him new information. They evoke dreams, visions, ambitions and—sometimes—actions. They light up the world around him: reality is clothed with freshness. Conversely, sometimes these artists play on his heartstrings the songs of doom, of horror, and of despair.

Whatever it is they do—by fair means or foul—they bring into play the emotions which are an important part of man's created personhood. Birth, life, death, purity, evil, love and hatred are the perpetual themes, the eternal subjects, and no creation of an artist is ever identical with that of another.

There are those who despise fiction, seeing it only as futile escapism, wasted stimulation of the emotions, and the purveying of what is virtually untruth. They see it as empty and false, devoid of basic reality.

In some ways they are right. Technically speaking, fiction is not fact and there is some validity in the dry old cliche that truth is stranger than fiction.

Yet man, in writing or telling fiction, is really drawing somewhere on what is truth. Jules Verne seemed outrageously away from the possible truth of scientific invention, but time has substantiated him. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* tells the truth, although the events he described may never have happened.

In this volume before the reader, what of it is truth and what fiction? The writer would claim it is all truth. He would claim that to enter into the mind of persons is a legitimate exercise. Man has an empathic power. He senses other

persons. This is why we delight to hear stories.

How many of Jesus' parables and stories were based upon factual happenings? We do not know; yet who debates the reality of the Prodigal Son, or the Good Samaritan? Those stories live as though they were real, historic persons.

In this volume, written for entertainment and thoughtfulness, are stories, every one of which is based upon actual persons and factual happenings. If the present writer has slanted them in a certain way, then what objection can there be? If the truth is basic then the colouring of the sincere artist will have done little to take away the truth of them. It is true that the truth cannot be enhanced, but at least it can be shown—sometimes—to be fascinating, stimulating, and—for the most—demanding upon its readers.

A FRAGMENT ABOUT LIVING**Autobiographical, but in the third person**

He stumbled, nearly fell, and leaned against the dappled bark of a rubber tree. Apart from the shortness of breath, the weakness of body and the wavering vision, everything was fine. The sky above had its fluffy patches of cloud against a full blue of colour. The fine and delicate leaves of the rubber trees had a tracery all of their own. They dipped and swayed gently in a lazy breeze. The sun expanded its gold about the place, and—for the moment anyway—there was a dreamy silence.

The main objection could have been that it was all within prison walls. Well, not exactly walls, but fences. The filigree of silver barbed wire enclosed all but the undauntable, those who felt moral outrage at being imprisoned. At nights they would persist in their objecting. They would wriggle their way through it, but morning would find them back again.

When he stumbled and nearly fell, he knew this could be the end. He had seen some trip and fall. Others could—with effort—help them to rise. But when a man stumbled through weakness he was often at the end. He grasped the haft of his long Thomas splint, urging his leg to uprightness. Finally he was standing straight.

Today all was preternaturally silent. Because of this he was uneasy. Generally there were noises. A Jap on the catwalk might growl a command, or snort in anger, or one prisoner might cry to another. There could be the low murmur of voices within the huts or the banging of utensils up in the

kitchen area. Not today. Today everything was velvet silence. Sounds were not simply subdued, but were just *non est*.

He shivered a trifle, pulled away from the tree, and began his dogged walking, dragging the senseless limb with him. He knew that he might fall. He also knew that if he did no one would know. Some might see him as they passed, but their strength, too, might be almost gone. They would take time to tell others, and then it might be too late.

He knew he was on the edge of panic. He gripped the splint more tightly. He urged his body forward, but it protested, albeit very wearily. It was a faint, tired protest. He himself wanted to slip towards the earth, folding his body as he went, and finally give way to sleep and the grey blank that was already forming in his mind.

It was then he heard the voice. In fact he knew it was the Voice. It said strongly and clearly, and in Elizabethan English, 'Thou shalt not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord!' The strong voice was patient, but it was firm. A thrill ran through him. Suddenly he realised the voice was not in his head, nor even in his heart, but outside of him. It had come through the atmosphere of the tropical island. It had located itself in a prison camp. It was speaking directly to him.

He knew then that, from this point, there would be no senseless fear, no wasted emotion of terror. He knew the machine-gun nests of guards. He knew the vulnerability of each prisoner. He knew his own weakness. But then *he knew he was not going to die!* Not anyway until he had declared the works of the Lord.

When he arrived at his hut and made his way up the steps to his bed he realised it had taken no effort. He had been buoyant in his mind and his body. In fact his spirit was singing. Only once before had he heard the voice of God. Then the voice had spoken loudly, but inside him. Here it had

spoken outside of him. He could not remember having previously read the actual words. He would see now whether they were in the Bible.

He sat on the edge of his bed, thumbing the pages of the Book. His mind told him it was in the Old Testament. Then he narrowed it down to the poetical writings. He leafed his way through Job and Proverbs, flicking the pages over in Ecclesiastes. Finally he went back through the Psalms. Much of them he knew. At last he found the words. They were in Psalm 118, verse 17. His eyes widened with surprise. They were written, not in the second person, but the first:

'I shall not die, but I shall live,
and declare the works of the Lord.'

A thrill went through him. He remembered some years before clambering up the side of a cliff, and when he should have slipped and hurtled to his death below, it had not happened. He had clung unbelievably to the sheer cliff face. Later his brother, trembling with fear, had said, 'God must look after you. It was a miracle.'

He also remembered the time, not three years before, when he had lain in Japanese territory, his leg shattered, and the blood flowing rapidly. Then he had been on the edge, on the very rim of death, but they had come and rescued him. The doctor had shaken his head in disbelief.

Later, but not much later, the Japanese captured the building, an allied makeshift hospital. When the medical officers had protested that the patients would die if moved, they met only shrugged shoulders. So the men had to be moved. In despair the medicos ordered lethal doses of morphine. The patients if shifted would die anyway—let them die without pain. All but two of them had died. Only Jim and he had lived. They had survived lethal doses of morphia!

You shall not die but live! He could feel the elation below

the surface, but something warned him to keep his emotions level. He refused to give way to the great joy which was there, just below the level of consciousness. He sat, staring ahead through the aperture of the *attap* which served as a window.

He knew that he knew the greatness of God. But, then, it was a personalised greatness. God cared for a man, for a single person. Doubtless He cared for all persons, but then, at this point in time, He had made it known to him. He shook his head in amazed belief. Months of grey doubting dissipated in the simple fact that God had visited him. Someone might say the voice had dredged up from some unconscious part of him. Well, that could be, but even now he could hear the echo of the words. They had all been outside of him:

‘Thou shall not die, but live,
and declare the works of the Lord.’

‘That’s right,’ he muttered doggedly. ‘And so I shall.’ And so, after all, he did!

CALLING BY NAME

Felix was undoubtedly a practical saint. When you thought about it, the matter was quite incredible. How did you take an old Gothic stone structure, such as that church, and arrange that five thousand people should hear the message you wanted to come through to them? It had been ingenious, even to the point of cunning, to do that. The pulpit had been placed inside the church, near a side door. Thus you could command a view of the entire congregation. Mirrors, placed thoughtfully, had assured that. Outside, great aluminium awnings had been bolted to iron piping. More mirrors, good diffusion amplification, and lo! the arrangements were complete. All you needed were five thousand people in the midst of monsoon weather.

He had forgotten nothing, this Felix. Advertising, film and newspaper announcements, a reporter or two, plus special signs around this Eastern city. The man who was to speak had been called from another country. He came, confident that what he would say was relevant. He lived in both the delight and seriousness of his message. Behind him a group of competent counsellors was ready to support and explain the message, bring it down to the need of persons.

It was last night that the seats had been filled. The typical humid warmth had deterred no one. They liked it that way. They had come, and sat, and sung, and listened. No great climax had come in their lives. For some it was the beginning of exposure. Layers of accumulated insulation seemed to melt and vanish. Yet there were more layers. One needed to go again, or perhaps one was warned against going again. The exposure might become total. Who knew what was

down there, in that mind, hidden away, rationalised from consciousness. Maybe some terrifying monster, some dark, troubling memory. Even then you shrugged. One might not have such an opportunity again. One, maybe, had better go again.

It was not the humidity which made the preacher sweat as he prepared. That contributed of course, but it was the struggle. The message he had prepared, way back in the land where he had been, but the message seemed not to be right. This was frustrating. He had taken hours over it, shaping it up, moulding it, fitting it to the way men and women thought. Besides, it was part of a series, a necessary link in a chain of holy reasoning. This further frustrated him. He stood, walked to the window, and looked out across the spacious lawns of the manse. Brilliant colours of the shrubs deflected his mind from his theme. Green pastures seemed to crowd in, and, for some strange reason, sheep.

With these insistent images on his mind, he returned to the desk, and flipped through some pages of his Bible. There it was: 'And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity.' But it was the next sentence which really caught his eye. 'When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad as sheep having no shepherd.' Vividly, at that moment, he remembered the crowded streets they had driven through the day before, the amorphous masses flocking the crowded buses, the swaying high-laden vehicles, the patient-eyed, plodding bullocks pulling their vast loads. Great streams of people moving along, and around and around.

So he opened the Scriptures and pursued the theme of sheep and the shepherd. With him were a few study books,

aids to his theme. They helped in his research. Mainly, however, he followed reference after reference concerning sheep and a shepherd. Something very beautiful fell into place on the pages before him. So gripped was he that the time passed, and when he was called for a meal he only went because of politeness.

For two hours it had rained solidly, insistently. A continuous sheet of downpouring, roaring rain. Everything was blotted out. When you looked from the window you saw only this grey-white sheet of water. He had seen monsoon rain before so that it was no surprise, but he doubted that he had seen it quite like this. The radio described it as 'phenomenal'. Some tragedies had already occurred, homes being washed away. Mostly, the problem was in the city, for the roads were feet deep in water.

When they went out into it they doubted they would reach the church. The roads were deserted, bearing only a high tide of rushing water. It streamed out into the side streets, filling up lanes, spilling on to playing fields and rushing across the coconut plantations to reach the sea. Some lights shone as a bright blur, but it was difficult to see the shops. The church loomed up as a sentinel island, grey in the rain, but visible. The car drove under the awnings for there was room where the seats had been pushed in, out of the rain, and piled high upon one another.

Felix was there, urbane in his white cassock, and confident. 'They'll come,' he said calmly. 'But they won't be so many.' Of course he was right. Ushers took up their stance at the door, and in the aisles. Folk peeled off their plastic coats and hung them on the hooks. The water streamed across the porch.

Inside, the church was cosy. Lights glowed warmly. People sat in the pews and seats, tucking together. They

obviously enjoyed the singing conducted by an enthusiastic leader. Something in them seemed released as they sang. The rafters nodded benignly at this unaccustomed joy. The worship, led by Felix, mellowed the minds of the participants. The awnings remained uninhabited. Not one seat out there was taken. The doors were closed and the mirrors reflected nothing. Fifteen hundred people waited for the word of the speaker. Tonight could be a special night. They wondered.

It was the next day when she came, the fair-skinned, rather beautiful woman. He noticed her grace, her noble features, her quiet appearance. He guessed the little emotion she showed was foreign to her. Normally she would be totally composed. She as much as told him.

‘It wasn’t easy for me to come,’ she said. She gave a slight gasp, and went on, breathlessly. ‘I was a Buddhist. I was brought up in a Buddhist home. I went to a Christian school, but it left me unimpressed. I never once saw anything which would have compelled me to change my mind or my religion.’ She looked at him intensely. ‘Not that it ever gave me anything. But I was loyal. You know we dislike the imposition of anything Western, especially religion. In this country we have no cause to think highly of the Christian faith.’

She stopped, looked down at her hands, and was silent. He realised at that moment that she was doing something which was unusual for her. She did not easily relate to a foreigner, nor disclose her inner self. It was as though, with him, she was seeing herself in this way for the first time.

‘I married a Christian,’ she said. She nodded. ‘I admit I loved him. But love, as such, was a foreign word to me. It wasn’t part of my vocabulary. We met, teachers in the same school. I liked him. I wanted him for my husband, and so I

became a Christian.’ She had a faint smile about her lips and she burrowed back into her memory. ‘I took instruction, and became a Christian. What do you say, “nominal”? I even went along with my husband when he taught children at Sunday School.’ She shook her head. ‘But it didn’t mean anything. Sometimes I wished it would, but after a time I just became cold. I was sure nothing would ever happen.’

She was staring at the red carpet on the vestry floor, following its patterns of lines and whorls. Then she looked up. ‘Something happened last night.’ There was a slight break in her voice. ‘You know what you preached about,’ she said, staring at him. ‘About the Shepherd.’

‘Why, yes,’ he said, surprised. His thoughts had been away from that message. ‘Yes, about the Shepherd.’

‘He’s a Shepherd,’ she said gently, softly.

A silence fell over the room. They both sat, looking at the carpet. His mind returned to the message. Up there, in the high wine-glass pulpit, it had occupied him. For a time the people had only been a blur.

Moses had been a shepherd. He had cared for his sheep in the backside of the desert until he saw the Glory in a bush. He didn’t know that the Glory was a Shepherd also. Later Moses had pastored his flock of people in the dry desert of Sinai, until God told him that the flock was His—God’s—and Moses was simply the under-shepherd. He came to understand that, but something of the heart of the Glory had passed into him. Before he died he had said to the Glory, ‘Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who shall go out before them, and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in: that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep which have no shepherd.’ Moses could not

bear them to wander and be scattered.

The preacher had traced the theme of Israel and the shepherd. The cry of the prophet Micah: 'I saw all Israel scattered upon the mountains, as sheep having no shepherd.' Then the famous thirty-fourth chapter of Ezekiel with its teaching: 'So they were scattered because there was no shepherd. For thus says the Lord, "Behold, I, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out My sheep. I Myself will be the shepherd of My sheep, and I will make them lie down...I will set up over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd."'

Jesus said, 'I am the good shepherd; I know my own, and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.' 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees: and the wolf snatches and scatters them.'

The preacher had seen the wolf leap upon the Shepherd, and watched the snarling, grappling, God-hating, Satanic form. Millenniums of hatred had enraged him to seize this darling of God, this Messiah. A bold move for evil, but had not Jesus said in the Garden, 'This is your hour, and the authority of darkness'?

What horror! The hour in all history when evil was unleashed, allowed to do its damndest. Jesus had said, 'Satan is coming, but he has nothing in me. But that the world may know that I love the Father, as the Father has given me commandment, so I do.'

Do what? 'Lay down my life for the sheep. Give Satan everything on me that he may have nothing on man.'

What does this mean? It means that the accusation which

is sharpest and bitterest in the depths of the spirit of man is borne by the Holy One, and the holy conscience of him. He takes the sorrows and griefs of man's sins and failures and works them out to their death before the Holy Father.

'What I had not seen,' she said, 'was that the Father struck the Good Shepherd, Himself.'

'Yes,' he said wonderingly, for only the day previous had he seen that, 'It is there undoubtedly,' he averred. 'You get it in Matthew 26:31, "You will all be scandalised because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.''"

The original form of the prophecy had been changed as Jesus quoted it. In Zechariah 13:7 it had been written, 'Awake, O sword, against my fellow,' saith the Lord of hosts, 'smite the shepherd...' He had seen the sword of judgement poised to strike in the hour of the Cross. He had seen the dark, hurtling form of the wolf, Satan himself, bringing every accusation to bear upon the sinless One, who had become as the sinful—all mankind. Here was the Glory Himself sustaining the pitiful, painful failure of man, both in being and doing.

He was surprised to see tears trickling from her luminous eyes. She was unashamed as she looked at him. Culture had slipped away, and the age-old drama of love-to-man, love-to-God, was being played. 'I saw him as my Shepherd,' she whispered. 'Oh, how I loved him. How he loved me. I wasn't a Buddhist. I wasn't even a Christian. I was me, and he was my Shepherd. Outside the rain was beating down; inside that church the Shepherd met us. He cried from the Cross, and he came down to love me.'

The tears were flowing. 'I'm glad I saw the Shepherd,' she said. 'When I went home it was different with my husband too. Now I know what he knows. We both know.'

The vestry door was open to the brilliant tropical sunshine. The heat, of course, was steamy after that rain. By the evening the rain might come again, perhaps with lesser intensity. Perhaps folk would be gathered under the awnings, or maybe only just fill the church. In a way it did not matter. In any case the Shepherd was abroad. He had been about his business yesterday, changing a sermon.

‘And changing a woman, also,’ he thought, as he went on staring into the sun.

ANGRY UNTO DEATH

To tell the truth I am stunned. Perhaps *shattered* is the better word. I am shattered and desolate as I sit amidst the remnants of a shade-booth I built but a day or two ago.

A gentle but sudden miracle happened in regard to my booth. A tree grew up so quickly as I slept that I knew it to be a miracle and not a normal, natural happening. It covered the booth as a thick canopy. Man, it was so cooling, so protective. To tell the truth, I luxuriated in it. I sat in my booth as a protected person.

Outside, the sun glared and beat on this plain. Its heat quivered to a rippling haze. A day before it had beat mercilessly upon me from that brilliant but pitiless sun. Suddenly I was enveloped in a strange, cool love which had come mysteriously upon me.

Kindness was how I understood it, but then I was careful not to enquire as to its origins. I had my reasons for this. I did not want to believe God had done this gentle miracle, so I let it be. I let its reality remain suspended in my mind.

Look, now, at the booth. My home-made structure has dead leaves, crumpled and bent branches. The life has gone from them. Hours ago it was turgid with life. It was substantial with a living strength and vibrancy. The hot wind, the sirocco, comes beating across this plain and the dry leaves rattle around the booth. It passes and they are limp and sere. It is like a ghost-booth in fact.

Here I sit, and in a stupefied state. The burning sun easily penetrates the thin covering of my open hut. It blazes about my head until my eyes swim in hot fluid and my mouth is dry and my nostrils as sere as the leaves flapping dumbly

above me. The long, slow, steady anger burns as strongly within me as the sun above me. Of course I shall tell the story. It has to be told. I imagine a story such as mine will be told around the market places of the world. Even then men will barely credit it could have been so.

I will spare you many of the details. I am too tired, too angry to go into these, and you will only be wanting the principle, anyway. It all began with my being a prophet. God is most unpredictable in His choice of prophets. You will know that very well. Always when He calls a prophet He calls him into His presence before sending him out into the world.

Being called in to Him is a strange experience. It is at once both beautiful and terrible. It is beautiful because you see Who God is. It is terrible because you never visualised Him in the way you now see Him. Part of Him is great and wonderful. He is, so to speak, oceans of mercy, flowing rivers of kindly goodness, vast inland seas of unchanging righteousness. Over all He is Holiness Itself, but with all these is a stern, unremitting purity, a steady, unfaltering hatred of evil and wrong. He does not budge from His essential Being. His love does not flinch from the judgements of His righteousness, nor swerve from the demands of His holiness.

So being called in is both glory and terror. One has to accept new and different dimensions.

Every time thereafter, when one speaks, the vision is there. If you cry, 'Thus saith the Lord!' then you know that is how it is. He does say it, and in this way. For people it is very confronting. Sometimes you see the hatred blaze out of their eyes as they react to what you say. Other times deep wonder is there and trembling reverence. Some bow in glad submission. Others stiffen in unresponsive obstinacy.

To get to the substance of my story let me tell you that our

God gave me my marching orders. 'Get to Nineveh immediately,' He said. 'The wickedness of the city is great. As you know, nothing escapes Me in My creation, and this situation is particularly bad. Go and preach to them.'

Nineveh! I could scarcely believe it. Nineveh! Our habitual enemies. I won't recount the whole situation, but anyone knows that Nineveh is Assyria, and Assyria is the traditional enemy of our holy nation. One part of me wanted to go and tell Nineveh all about her evil and cruelty. It longed to see God do His thing there; to see Him execute His judgement. I mean. Another part of me, that sensitive clever part, forbade me to go. 'No way,' it said. 'That is the last thing you should do.'

The latter part won. I would have to get away from God. I had to put some distance between Him and me. Underneath it all I knew you can't do that kind of thing. However, I was alarmed that He might force me Nineveh-wards and so I took the first available ship. It was going to Tarshish, and I said to myself, 'I shall soon be out of the presence of the Lord.'

That was my foolish thinking. It just did not work. You are never out of His presence, as I learned. No sooner was I in that ship than a giant wind arose and threatened to destroy us. For my part I was exhausted. You may say this was from my own inner conflict, for of course I knew I was disobeying God. I thought, however, that my disobedience was a sheer necessity by nature of the case. Later I will tell you plainly what I meant by all this.

When the great wind arose I was asleep. The sailors were deeply afraid and they tried to lighten the vessel by throwing the cargo overboard. When things are bad you try desperate measures. However, their attempts to save the ship were futile. I was the real cause of the catastrophe and I confessed as much. I told them the truth: that I was a Hebrew, that God had given me a mission, and that I had reneged on His

orders.

Whilst I was telling them this the wind was at its peak. It literally howled about the ship, tossing it like a cork on a stream. It had whipped up the waves until they were mountainous. Very dramatic, of course, but quite calamitous. In a way I trembled with them, but then I knew the nature of Him, and I was actually goaded to madness.

He was going to get me to Nineveh—come wind, come weather.^t

Having made my confession I told them quietly to throw me into the sea. It would immediately become calm. They eyed me strangely at that, but shook their heads. They were good fellows, not anxious to have the guilt of death on their hands. They refused, saying they would try to get the ship back to port. Perhaps that was as good as making a sacrifice of me to the sea!

It just didn't work. The sea raged angrily, the waves reared up in high mountains of black water and spumed crests, and these experienced mariners knew it was no storm of nature but the very anger of the Creator Himself. I tell you it was a drama of grand proportions, and they cried out in their high fear, 'We beseech Thee, O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood: for Thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased Thee.'

With this they grasped me and threw me overboard.

In an instant all was calm. How uncaring it was—that peace! I can still see their terrified eyes staring down at me. The awe of it all had them spellbound. Some of them began to use the great oars to draw away from me, for I was to them, now, an object of horror. I saw others hastening to gather fuel to make a fire. There and then, even in their vessel, they must give an offering to this God who holds the sea in His hands. I had told them of the God 'who is the God of heaven and had made the sea and the dry land.'

Doubtless their god was a small fellow, a minor deity of no consequence. They knew now that they were dealing with the Most High God. In their awe and terror they made vows of gratitude. Forever they would remember Him.

As for me, well, that unresting God had appointed an enormous fish to take me in one gulp. Down I went, down and down into darkness and heat. Along with me, the monster had also gulped a great sea salad. It was to titillate the palate of that omnivorous creature. I felt so tiny, so insignificant. With the salad I was swept from maw to belly, where of course I suffered greatly. Rather than go into that experience in detail, I offer you the poem that I wrote. Indeed it was a psalm of gratitude as much as an epic of horror. Read it, now, if you will, but I pray you seek to see and feel yourself in my place. How vivid was the event to me. May it also be vivid to you!

'I called to the Lord, out of my distress,
and He answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and Thou didst hear my voice.
For Thou didst cast me into the deep
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood was round about me;
all Thy waves and Thy billows
passed over me.
Then I said, "I am cast out
from Thy presence:
how shall I again look
upon Thy holy temple?"
The waters closed in over me,
the deep was round about me;
weeds were wrapped about my head
at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me for ever;
yet Thou didst bring up my life
from the Pit,
O Lord my God.
When my soul fainted within me,

I remembered the Lord:
and my prayer came to Thee,
into Thy holy temple.
Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to Thee;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!

An Interruption by the Writer:

Pardon this intrusion. I am not Jonah. I am not even a prophet. I am a student, even a scholar of sorts. I lack the fire of a prophet but then I have powers of empathy. It is not difficult for me to sense how the prophet felt. That is why I have given much attention to Jonah, and especially to his song.

It is brilliant. As a theologian I am tempted to analyse it and so discern Jonah's subjective apprehension of God in his moments of humiliation and danger within the great sea monster. However, I resist that temptation in the interests of a special comparison. This can be found in two of the Christian Gospels, the first mention is in Matthew 12:38–41 and the second in Luke 11:29–32.

The essence of these is that Jesus would give no sign except that of Jonah: in short, the fact of Jonah being in the belly of the whale. Three days and nights had Jonah been there, and a similar time would Jesus be in the earth, meaning, in his case, the grave.

Some see Jonah as an analogy. I see him as an homology. He went through an experience of the very same order. The difference was Jesus went into it with his will one with God's. Jonah went into his experience with his will set stubbornly to fulfil his own secret purpose. I wish you to compare, with Jonah's, a poem Jesus had in his mind when con-

tained within the grave. Peter quoted it on the Day of Pentecost when he was in the High Spirit of understanding. He said:

'This Jesus. delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death. because it was not possible for him to be held by it. For David says concerning him,

*'I saw the Lord always before me,
for He is at my right hand that I may not be shaken:
therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced:
moreover my flesh will dwell in hope.
For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades,
nor let Thy Holy One see corruption.
Thou hast made known to me the ways of life:
Thou wilt make me full of gladness with Thy presence.'" (Acts 2:23–28; Psalm 16:8–11).*

Do you notice the difference? Jonah is grim, Jesus serene. Jonah cries out in terror and desire for rescue. Jesus rejoices. Gladness, gratitude and confidence are the keynotes of his song.

My considered opinion, from the story of Jonah, is that he carried a deep hatred for the Ninevites. He desired not to preach lest the Word be so powerful as to turn them to God from their evil. Were this to happen, he thought, then God would save them. That, Jonah could not bear,' that it should be he, Jonah, who would be the saviour of Israel's hated enemy.

My own simple comment is this: 'Jonah needed an experience to break him, for a broken spirit is the true sacrifice to God. A man may have to go through deep traumas until his will is broken. I marvel that a prophet—especially one taken into the presence of God—could still be obstinate in his will.'

What of course God did for him was to bring him a brilliant revelation of His personal love for him. This experience was a prototype of the Calvary–Resurrection complex.

The question I ask is, ‘Did Jonah fully understand? Did a universal love flow from his heart folio wing this experience of personal deliverance?’ I leave you to judge the matter.

Now let us return to our story.

I stare out from my derelict booth. My hot eyes are fixed on the city below me. I hear the sounds of great rejoicing. Well they might rejoice! I tell you it is not so long ago that I arrived at their city. Of course I obeyed God when the great fish spewed me on to land. What could I do then but fulfil my prophetic calling? I was to be the very voice of God Himself to that ancient city of moral uncleanness, of deep sin and terrible violence.

Tradition has it that the city is so vast it requires three days to travel through its breadth. There are clear enough reasons for this. I was not of a spirit to brook interruption in my journey, and the folk looked at me curiously enough, and a little fearfully. I penetrated far enough into that vile place and my heart and mind were sick from the evil I saw. After a day I stood and gave my message: ‘Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'

Not once did I say that message, but many times. I knew my voice to be the voice of God Himself, and so did they.

The effects of that message were astonishing. You would almost have thought they had been awaiting it. They stared at me in abject terror. They left their evil and cowered back. Some attempted weakly to laugh off the proclamation, but others quietened them. They crept closer, staring at me.

I knew my premonition was right. *They were hearing!* The message spread rapidly until it reached their great monarch. The effect was dramatic. That high man stripped his robe from himself, throwing it down. He called for the garments of mourning. His greatness was humbled to the dust. He sat in sackcloth and ashes—he, the great king of

Nineveh—and the people of Assyria.

The rest you can easily guess. His people followed suit. There was great wailing, deep tears of sorrowful repentance, expressions of horror at their dreadful license and their foul acts. I saw the tears. I sensed the depth of the change in their hearts. I listened to the heralds as they, dressed in garments of wretchedness, made public proclamation in every market place and hamlet:

‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, nor drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them cry mightily to God; yea, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from His fierce anger, so that we perish not!’

My heart sank with every proclamation and every fresh evidence of a changed and repentant people. My question was, ‘Will God change His mind and turn from His fierce anger and not destroy them?’

My worst fears—indeed my deepest convictions—were realised. *God was not going to destroy Nineveh!'*

My anger knew no bounds and I made my protest. The rage that burned in me was indescribable. I tell the words I spoke to God: ‘I pray Thee, Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that Thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and that Thou repentest of evil. Therefore now, O Lord, take my life from me, I beseech Thee, for it is better for me to die than to live.’

I tell you I bargained with God in my great anger. Surely He would pity His prophet as He had once pitied another prophet, Elijah. As he did, so did I. I said, ‘Take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’

His voice came to me quietly: ‘Do you do well to be

angry?’

When I turned to explain the righteousness of my anger He was gone.

That was when I built the booth. Sick at heart, I was glad to have something to do. I gathered broken branches of the dry acacias. I poked pieces of grass and leaves into the crude structure, for I knew the heat would be cruel. I was determined, nevertheless, to see the fruits of my proclamation.

I sat and stared towards Nineveh. In my heart a great fire was burning, a fire of rage which grew out of true and righteous anger. You well know the disgusting uncleanness of these Gentiles, and the foul abominations of their idols, and the cruelty of their hideous war machine. ‘A judgement on them and all their foul brood!’ was the cry of my heart.

I longed to see the judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah repeated across that vast city. How eager was my heart to match my eyes in knowing of a dreadful holocaust. I stared until my eyes hurt with the strain and my body ached with the tension of my straining.

Nothing happened. I could hear the wails faintly, the cries of repentance to the Most High God, the Universal Creator. No fire fell. No earthquake shook the land. No thunder growled. No hailstones of fire swept across the land.

Then I knew, as they also knew, that the wrath of God had passed. His longsuffering and goodness and patience, with His stern warning, had brought them to repentance.

Gradually the wails changed to silence, the pitiful cries to a gentle hush of peace. Then out of that silence came cries of joy, shouts of praise, songs of adoration and gratitude. The smoke I saw, and the flames with it, were of reverent sacrifice.

With it all my anger grew. It steadily mounted until my whole body was trembling, until it was vibrant with wrath

and then shaking with rage. I shook my fist, whilst my heart cried, ‘Betrayed! Betrayed!’ I had thought my plea might have changed His mind again, but it was not so.

Then this thing happened. This plant, I mean. This plant with rich, leafy foliage. It was suddenly there, so to speak. It blotted out the burning sun. It brought gentle shade into my booth. It covered me over protectingly. I know you will say it was a sign from God that He loved me. I tell you I loved that plant itself for what it had done. That is as close as I have ever come to idolatry in my life, *loving a thing of God’s creation more than Him*.

The next morning I continued my vigil. I stared sullenly, hoping that even at this late hour God’s disgust would come to be as large as mine, and His anger at least equal to that of mine. As I stared I felt the first hot rush of the desert wind from the east. It was then I discovered the death of the covering plant. Its dead arms and withered leaves hung listlessly over the booth. The sun gathered strength with the hot wind and together they sought to fulfil my prayer for death.

If the sun and wind were burning outside they were no less than the hot anger within. My wrath burst out in a violent prayer as abject as it was angry. I cried to God to let me die.

God said quietly, ‘Do you do well to be angry for the plant?’

I said stubbornly, stolidly, ‘I do well to be angry.’ I said, for good vindictive measure, ‘Angry enough to die.’

Somewhere within me was a wild hope. My despair might move Him for the gentle plant. It might even move Him to carry out His righteous judgement.

Of course I should have known better. His words burned into me as no sun or wind could ever do. He said, ‘You pity the plant, for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a

night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

I sit here pondering those words. I have, of course, no answer. How could I? God is always supreme. I know not what is just or what is unjust. All I am confronted with is this great love of His for a sinful people, and I cannot say I understand it.

Jonah! Jonah! Dear fierce, patriotic prophet. Lover of a plant and hater of a people. Symbol of great righteousness. Prophet of doom which was to bring true delight.

Jonah—brother of all fallen humans. How you have taught us! You have shown us that we can be angry unto death, and that that anger can bring us to our own death.

We understand since he came—the Son of the Father—that our so-called great hates are small and pitiful, petty and piffling. Nothing is great about that kind of anger. How guilty you were about your anger so that you had to love something! You had to fasten on a gentle plant which carried the kindness of God to you. How was it you did not learn in the grave of the sea monster? Did not love come to you, then? Could not the despair of the grey people, the sinful Ninevites move your heart? Had you not been with God?

Yes, you had. Did He not show you the Cross? Did He not tell you that false human anger is an offence to that Cross, or that that Cross is an offence to false human anger? Did He not tell you that 'he bore our griefs and carried our sorrows'? Did He not show that the true holy wrath upon all evil—even that of Nineveh—had been borne in the propitiation for all sins?

What great love then, O prophet! It takes away the angers of little minds against God and His universe. It releases from long-burning rages and imagined indignities upon the human spirit.

No need to watch repentant Nineveh. It has the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. Our God reigns! Amen: for He is the God of love—of sinners, prophets, and plants!

He is Love Himself!

IT SOMETIMES HAPPENS BUT NOT OFTEN

One day someone is going to read this story. He is going to put down the volume, pick up his pen, and write a letter. He is going to write firmly and steadily, his hand penning the words, with perhaps his lips pressed in firm disapproval. I imagine the words he will write will be something like this:

'Sir, you have written the short story of the century, the truest, most wonderful short story of the century. I accept the fact. Indeed as a man of God I glory in what you have written; but sir, what right have you to be so blatant, to literally purloin an event which happened when you were not there, when you did not see it? It was not your story to write. In it there is no acknowledgment of its source, no mention of its original narrator.'

Should I ever receive such a letter I will of course be filled with shame, and burning shame at that. Nevertheless at the same time I will steal a look at the name of the writer. I too will take up a pen and write as firmly and steadily to him as he has to me. I shall tell him that for years I have wanted to discover the original narrator, and, if possible, the original participants in the event.

I doubt whether such a thing will happen. Whilst it is true that I was there, perhaps even in the same prisoner-of-war camp, yet I did not witness the event. Someone told me the story because it was told to him. He said he heard it in a beautiful parish church, built of South Australian bluestone, old by reckoning in that State of that country, and he had heard it on a rare and golden Sunday morning, when the sky was a brilliant blue, washed pure by a summer downpour of rain, and when the drops of rain on the

rosemary bushes were each like gems of golden fire.

He told me how gracious a man was the minister, a vicar of no mean order and the very jewel of a story-teller. He told me that this man had enraptured his audience as he skilfully described the event. Whilst it is possible that I have forgotten some of the details the listener recounted to me, it is not possible that the story, generally, is not a faithful recounting of the original.

The perspicacious reader of this story—and you may be that one—will surely ask, ‘If you know the church, the original retailer of the event, and the man who told you what the vicar had told him, then why not trace the story to its source? This, surely, is possible?’

Ah, my friend, I agree with you. Even sadly I agree with you. Yes, of course you are right. I have it in my power to do so. I have by me, in fact, an old Diocesan Registry. I can trace the name of the English clergyman who originally told the story. In the interests of authenticating the narrative I certainly should write. Nor is it—in this case—my natural laziness which prevents me. My predilection to carelessness in such situations is not the real cause of my hesitation.

Since you have so mercilessly pinned me down, I am forced to make a confession. Frankly I am scared to write for fear the story is not factual. You can see how embarrassing it would be for the original story-teller if his story was but a fanciful flight of his charming imagination. More, it would shatter the delight of us all; for the story, if we set aside its grim aspects, is as charming a chronicle as has been told in all history. Hence I hesitate to write in order to authenticate it for fear of loss of the incredible.

If you ask me bluntly, ‘Do you really believe this story?’ then I must answer, ‘Yes, with all my heart. Things like that happened in those days, and also I believe in God.’ That may amaze you, but then you do not know me. You may not know that a man can believe the truth of a story and yet

at the same time 'believe not for joy', as is recorded in another place.

There will be those reading these lines who by now will be impatient, even disgusted. They will think the writer is in his anecdote. And sadly true it is—what they say. I beg their pardon. I apologise deeply. I hasten to tell the story. Yet I trust—oh, I trust!—that they will believe it as indeed I also believe.

Let me add, however, that I will be glad to receive that letter from the original story-teller should it ever arrive.

The scene itself was grim enough. The long lines of huts were covered by plantation rubber trees. Between them walked or limped or shuffled the prisoners of the nation of Nippon. Their thin, starved bodies with the feet flopping, the hands hanging heavily, were slow in locomotion. To look at the eyes was to read the souls of those who made their way to the prison vegetable garden. The soul of a man can often be seen when you penetrate his gaze, but in this case nothing was hidden. It was open for all to see. The days of pretence were past. The naked truth was laid bare. Yet few cared to read that truth.

The partially-ill worked in the garden each day, their *chunkels* rising and falling in slow, painful rhythm. They were cheered on only by the fact that the vegetables would find their way, some day, to the mess of the hospital camp. There was towgay, tapioca and tropical spinach. There were other vegetables also, some whose names were unknown. At the far end, the north end, was a grove of papaya, but the fruit never reached its golden glory and its natural juicy softness. It was picked when green and used as a vegetable.

Not all was grimness. Even the guards could not repress the inevitable humour. Naked souls, you might say, describing the captured soldiers, but you would have to give them

credit for unending humour and the incredible variety of fun they could invent to counter the grimness of their days. Often, then, the laughter rang out. Some of the guards took it personally, becoming irritated and angry, but then they too would fall to laughter at the ridiculous antics that were sometimes played. They would nod their heads vigorously, as though in agreement, and they would laugh heartily.

Inside one of the huts a man was dying. He was wasting away, dully waiting for the end. The strange fact is that he was not dying of a disease. He was dying of wanting to die. He was dying because the great lethargy was claiming him.

The great lethargy is difficult to understand, especially if you have never been in it. 'Loss of spirit,' some people called it, gently. Others say, 'Dropping the bundle.' These terms do not cover it, however. My own assessment is that people see suddenly that the purpose they had has dissolved, or the goal they desired to achieve is utterly impossible. They lose heart, which is a way of saying they relinquish purpose in life. This is equivalent to saying that meaning has disappeared. Thus everything is hopeless.

There are other features. Some personality weakness or flaw has appeared. The desire to cope is defeated. Despair—which is faith's opposite—takes over. A blankness fills the mind and the spirit. The person seeks a state of non-being. The 'courage to be' has departed and the mind cuts off all communication, going out as it does into the limbo of uneasiness. Vague anxieties float about it. Further effort is made to reach nothingness. Meanwhile the ego has been loosening all its connections with the reality it has known. It has receded from persons, relationships. It is sailing in a vast, lonely sea. Then it is not even sailing. There is no sea: there is nothingness.

The Dutchman, lying there on the narrow bed, was not an ignorant man. He was a man of great knowledge. Indeed he was a university professor, a man of nimble mind. His

friend, the English chaplain, had a deep affection for his afflicted comrade, and this kept him at the bedside. He was genuinely concerned, but utterly helpless. There were those occasions, as he watched, when the eyes of the professor opened, but then there was a devastating blankness. He was a man *incommunicado*, and not, so to speak, a true man. There was no recognition in the eyes, and no response in the limp hand held by the padre.

It had gone on for days. The men who attended the professor simply shrugged their shoulders. After all, they had seen this before. To their way of thinking it was the way of bland futility. A man ought to desire to live. They stopped on occasion, to force water through the limp lips. Up went the head, lifted and supported by capable hands. The eyes opened blankly, the close-shaven head lolled like that of a rag doll. The water dribbled through the mouth, some of it spilling out on to the bare chest. There would be a faint sigh, a further refusal to be awakened to reality. The head was laid again on the pillow. Silence closed over all things again. Sometimes the chaplain drowsed.

After all, he was a tired man, as weak and starved as the others, but he insisted on clinging to this life, whilst it passively insisted on escaping. He would pray endlessly, sitting there, watching his much-loved friend. He would talk silently to God. Sometimes the ward orderlies saw his lips moving, but silently. He prayed on, scarcely knowing how his prayers could be answered, but knowing that they would. 'God is good.' he would murmur, reassuring himself. He would nod drowsily and repeat it: 'God is good.'

He was in heavy sleep when it happened. Somewhere, down in the depths of his tiredness, he sensed a miracle, but it was there in the dream realm rather than in the world of reality. As he opened his eyes, he expected to see something; what he did see surely had to be fantasy.

You might well agree with this, his first response. You

might well ask the question, 'When does a man see a little brown hen in a prison camp?' Up in the guards' quarters perhaps, or where the officers live, but never, never in the prison hospital ward.

The chaplain saw the hen nestle down on the feet of the Dutch professor. The legs were stretched out on the bed. The feet were together. So there, nestled about the ankles, the little hen sat determinedly, and it was laying an egg. Unbelievably, it was laying an egg.

What puzzled the chaplain was that no one seemed to have seen; neither when it flew in nor when it nestled on the ankles. He shook his head to ensure he was not dreaming. There, however, and still nestled, was the hen.

Having laid the egg it flew away, but silently. It did not cackle proudly or advertise to the world the wonderful thing it had done. It was as humble as it was determined.

The chaplain swore the professor had opened his eyes, partly, and that he had seen the hen and then the egg. The professor made no admission of these facts. When the chaplain stretched out his arm and took the small warm egg, the professor had gone off again into his self-protective coma.

The excitement of the man of God knew no end. He knew it was the answer to prayer. He hurried away to prepare an egg-nog, a concoction of beaten egg, salt, pepper and water. He had another ingredient which was so rare, although its name would be universally known. This he also incorporated. Then he took the fresh new shell and pounded it to a fine powder, pouring it into the egg-nog, and all was ready.

It took something to awaken the professor. Long ago he had refused to eat food. Amazingly, in that place of starvation, he had rejected food entirely. The chaplain talked, thumped, called to him, pummelled and shook him until the large, lazy frame showed faint signs of life. Then he talked to his friend from Holland.

'Adrian,' he shouted, 'an egg-nog for you!'

There was no comprehension in the eyes. He knew the Dutchman had loved egg-nogs. He shouted again. He fancied there was a faint flicker in the withdrawn gaze and he shouted yet again.

The shout reached the haggard man. There was a faint flicker of interest, a touch of annoyance, and an element of surprise.

‘A hen,’ shouted the chaplain. ‘It sat on your ankles and laid an egg!'

The shout reached the orderlies, who grinned at one another. Good old Padre! He used all kinds of methods. Well, after all, what was wrong with a holy lie, now and then? The end justified the means, didn’t it?

The professor pointed at his ankles with a faint, limp gesture of his drooping hands. His look was bleak, but at least it was a look. He kept looking towards his ankles whilst the padre poured egg-nog into his mouth, and down the throat.

Then the professor was gone. The sound of gurgling was finished. The Dutchman was away again, into somnolence. The brief visit into reality was ended—vanquished by the rapid flight back to nothingness.

The chaplain was disappointed. After a time he could not sit and watch the failure of a great miracle. He went out to find some men and talk to them. They always seemed to need him, as at this moment he needed them. After awhile, however, he returned and submissively resumed his vigil of prayer.

The next day he was sitting again, watching his inert friend. The Dutchman gave a slight twitch now and then, and his inertia seemed, if anything, faintly disturbed. The chaplain did not allow himself to be overly moved by such faint stirrings. The loss of spirit seemed so complete. It was as though the professor was drawing close to his pointless goal—a tip-over into the realm of human death. The chap-

Iain had been long troubled by this. He knew there was a time to be born and a time to die. To die in due time was to reverence death as it was to reverence life. To cheapen life by escape from it into death was to cheapen death also. The chaplain never saw death as a dark intruder but as the quiet friend of men of faith.

As he meditated, the little hen appeared again, fluttering high on raised wings, faintly awkward, chattering only slightly and alighting with as much grace as can be known in a hen. This time it did not settle on the ankles but on the abdomen. It nestled in with not so much as a sigh and began its earnest work of laying an egg. The chaplain held his breath, trusting no one noticed the hen. The amazing fact was that the hen seemed *incognito*, although it was there just below the Dutchman’s navel, and, literally, large as life.

The chaplain watched the Dutchman. The sick man stirred a trifle, though not enough to disturb the small brown fowl. An eye opened. The chaplain’s heart gave a slight leap. The eye was actually looking. Then, as though ashamed of its temerity it closed, only to be opened again, hastily. In fact two eyes stared, amazed and a little terrified. It was as though two forces fought for supremacy. One was the escape-by-death wish, and the other was hope. The chaplain believed that hope in life, and hope for life was returning.

The eyes closed, this time tightly, but their tightness betrayed the professor. The old limp and vapid stance had altered somewhat. Prayer and the little hen seemed to be winning, even though the margin gained was as nothing compared to the Dutchman’s desire for death.

There was a faint flutter of wings and the hen was gone. Whether to heaven from where it had possibly come, or to the fowl-run of the Japanese guards, the chaplain did not know. He simply saw the small egg, not quite pink, not quite brown, warm and translucent, calm and sitting on the

belly of the skinny Dutch professor.

Marvelling, he hastened away, bearing his precious capsule of yolk and milky white. He beat into it the simple salt, pepper and water, and added his rare touch of spice. He hastened back to the sleeping man and shook him boldly.

‘Hey, professor, my good friend. Here is your egg from God, your heavenly egg-nog. Drink it, you great oaf!’

The professor, surprisingly, awakened. His eyes had a gleam in them. However faint it was, it was a gleam. At first there was a weak protest, a hesitant, scholarly protest, a touch of the old academic stance. That and nothing more. He took the egg-nog in the rusty tin cup and drank it. A passing orderly expressed surprise. He had counted the professor for dead. He had read the signs, giving him a day or two.

‘What do you think of that?’ asked the chaplain eagerly. ‘Very goot,’ said the professor. His voice was thin, cracked, reedy, but it was a voice. It was a long time since the professor had spoken.

‘Now you must get strong,’ said the chaplain.

‘Strong?’ said the lanky Dutchman, a tear coming to his eyes. ‘I am for death, and not for life.’

‘Nonsense!’ said the chaplain, his voice at once both gruff and sharp. ‘You are for life.’

He saw the eyes grow rheumy, and the brow furrow. It seemed that a great sorrow, even despair was bearing down on the bony academic. The chaplain knew this could be fatal.

He said angrily, ‘You saw the hen, didn’t you?’

The professor looked at him. ‘Hen? Did you say *hen*?’ ‘I said *hen*,’ replied the chaplain. ‘The hen sat on you yesterday, and today, and each time laid an egg. Those were the eggs you had for egg-nogs.’

‘Oh, Gott!’ said the Dutchman faintly. His eyes rolled in fear. ‘I saw the hen,’ he whispered. ‘Oh, Gott! Oh, Gott!’

The chaplain parted his hand. His own palms were wet with sweat. ‘Take a rest now,’ he said. ‘Don’t exert yourself.’

The Dutchman closed his eyes. After a time the chaplain tiptoed from the ward. He went to see the men again, and to talk with them. Also he wanted to visit the small bamboo chapel and offer praise to the heavenly Father.

When he went, the Dutch academic felt under his pillow. Long ago he had put something there. It was a wallet with photographs in it. His fingers kept fumbling. Later an orderly found him, exhausted and asleep, his fingers clutching an unopened wallet.

The third day the hen came. It flew and alighted on the chest of the Dutchman. It made its nesting place among the silver-grey thatch of thorax hair. It eased itself on to the bony ribs, and remained in earnest endeavour.

The professor opened his eyes wide at the little hen. It looked at him boldly; you might say, regally. There was neither scorn nor compassion, but just a business-like practicality about it. Having completed its triad of operations, its threefold mercy, it was on its way to wherever it had come from. It went never to return.

It had run the gauntlet of hundreds of hen-hungry prisoners, yet none had seen it but the chaplain and the apathetic Dutchman. It was as though a dream, but dreams do not leave us with new-laid eggs.

The Dutchman had watched it from beginning to end. He had lain still, afraid lest the hen be scared away. When it had gone his nerveless hands had fumbled towards the warm, smooth fruit of the fowl.

‘Oh, no!’ exclaimed the chaplain. ‘Don’t touch it. It’s too precious.’ Nevertheless he did let the skinny Dutchman feel it with

his long spatulated fingers, and then he took it.

'Wait for the egg-nog,' he cautioned cheerily, and went away to beat the ingredients together, to grind the precious shell into lime-powder, and to make the drink complete and nourishing.

The Dutchman was sitting up, this being the first time in many weeks. An orderly had arranged a couple of pillows for him, borrowing them from empty beds.

'Praise be!' the academic was saying. 'Praise be!' 'Praise be!' agreed the chaplain. 'Now drink this up.' The professor needed no urging. His hands trembled as he held the rusty cup, but he insisted on holding it himself. He kept sipping and sucking and sighing, and then heaving away with asthmatic joy.

'Gott is goot!' he said eagerly. 'He is good!' agreed the chaplain.

He watched the last precious drops disappear into the pink mouth of the patient.

The Dutchman was rubbing his hands together soulfully, gleefully.

'A hen, eh?' he said. 'Just a little hen, eh?'

He chuckled to himself, and then shook his hand feebly towards heaven.

'What a humour, eh?' he asked. 'The good Gott He sends the little bird to lay eggs all over the old professor, so that the old professor must not die.'

'That's right,' said the chaplain, scarcely knowing what to say.

He added, 'The good God needs the old professor, eh? He doesn't want to lose all that training, all that wisdom, all that knowledge.'

The Dutchman stared at him. 'You t'ink that, hey?' he asked. He looked admiringly at his old chaplain friend, shook his head and went off into his asthmatic gurgle.

'Oh, the Gott, He is goot,' he said. He kept chuckling.

'He is very goot.'

Then he remembered the hen and his gurgling became deep, even more asthmatic. After a time he was gasping, and the tears were coursing out of his fine old eyes, and on to the silver-grey thatch on his torso.

'Oh, so goot,' he was saying in helpless joy. 'Oh yes, and oh, so lovink.'

When the chaplain slipped away because he could not hold back the tide of his own tears he heard the Dutchman repeating to himself, like some endless refrain:

'Oh, so lovink. So lovink.'

GIVE ME MY DUE

Give me my due, I pray you.
 My eyes dart restlessly,
 Ever and anon,
 Across the audience wide of every man,
 The whole world, so to speak.

Give me my due; laboured I have,
 Incessant from my birth,
 Seeking to please my parents,
 Impress my family,
 And draw praise from my teachers.
 I am the man who works,
 Seeking the praise of men.

Receiving this praise—
 As I do on occasions great—
 I am filled with gratitude.
 Should they not praise me, though,
 I feel the steely edge of bitterness
 Cutting within my soul.
 My face as adamant,
 I am all hard within.

Why should I covet praise?
 Why should I seek the plaudits
 Of men and God? I answer,
 'Nothing so assuring is,
 So reassuring, in a world
 With all competing for assurance
 In the praise of men and God.'

How frail we are! How insecure!
 Be there one critic, one despiser
 And our world turns grey.
 We miss encouragement, its warmth,
 The stimulus of others' worship,
 And the need of us by men.
 We need this need
 Else pointless were our days,
 And our spirits dulled.
 Could we but the vision see,
 Climb one high peak,
 And look across times vista
 To penetrate eternity—
 Then we might understand
 We need no praise, no gratitude;
 Nor covet the plaudits of men,
 Or seek to satisfy the Deity
 Whose image true we had not seen—
 'Til it became in Christ.

There is no need to walk in fear,
 To covet men's approving thoughts,
 Nor watch their actions with anxiety.
 For God is God, and history is His,
 And we His children born of dust and Cross,
 May settle into love with Him,
 Through Word and Spirit, Son and Life.
 We have no need to covet praise
 Nor grovel for acceptance by the world.

Give Him His due, I pray you
 For He has voided work
 That justifies the man,
 That bids him slave to justify

The actions of his living.
 How deeply anxious is the heart
 That lives to please both men and God
 But never can succeed. How frail
 And pitiful the plea to be received
 By men and God.

Without this labour
 God Himself receives.
 Without this toil
 He gives His rest to hearts of men.
 Labour He did through Cross and Tomb
 To make the work complete,
 Emancipate the slaves,
 And set the debtors free.

If this be true, then labour's vain,
 Except it be the work of gratitude.
 Come wind, come time, come troubles too,
 Our labour is from love
 For love; not to receive
 The warming plaudits
 Or the passing praise,
 But love to serve the Serving God
 And live within the Father.

THESE WERE TWO SISTERS

There were once two sisters. Their names were Martha and Mary. They had a brother named Lazarus whom they loved deeply. Doubtless he also loved them deeply. However, between Martha and Mary there was some friction. Probably there is a certain amount of friction between any two sisters, and possibly this was not an exceptional case. We hear nothing of the parents of this group of three persons, but imagine that they were—as are all parents—not perfect. We need some little explanation of why Martha was somewhat of a worrier, and Mary fairly calm and contemplative. Of Lazarus we know little, but assume his presence brought balance to the relationships of the two sisters.

Your writer is about to embark upon a hazardous course. He is seeking to understand Martha and Mary, and to puzzle out why they should be mentioned so much in the Gospels. Few others receive so much attention as persons, and it is reasonable to think they are significant people. The sisters have become quite famous, and many people have already settled their views of the two women.

Some say, 'Oh, you know, I am like Martha: always doing things. I fancy Martha because she is practical. Mary was gentle, but then a bit of a dreamer. Not practical you know.'

Others say, 'I guess I'm a bit of a dreamer like Mary, but then that is how one is made.'

The latter remark is probably a let-out for human laziness, and the former a rationalisation of a certain kind of busyness. Note that both speakers have some kind of pride in identifying with one or the other of the two sisters.

The fact is that there has only ever been one Martha and one Mary just like them. Each person is unique, and although one may have things in common with either Martha or Mary, one is not 'a Martha' or 'a Mary'. No one is a type, really, because the possibilities in any given human are endless.

The story of the two sisters and the one brother falls easily into three sections, so I will deal with each that way. We will proceed to Part One.

Part One

The scene is set in the home of the two sisters. The brother is not mentioned. The house is in the village of Bethany, not a great distance from Jerusalem. In Luke, chapter ten (verses 38-42), we read the simple story. Jesus, we are told, entered the village of Bethany and was received by Martha into the house. We gather, then, that Martha had only the one guest. One guest is not much. Doubtless the grapevine had been working well, and Martha was anticipating Jesus' arrival. With true Eastern courtesy she would have refreshed him with the opportunity for a washing of hands and feet, and a touch of olive oil to the face and hair. Then she would have seated him, and set about bringing in the meal if it were time for that.

Mary, we are told, sat at Jesus' feet and listened to what he had to say. To sit at the feet of a person means, in the East, to be taught. Mary was a quiet, teachable person.

Martha was out with the pots and pans. She was making something of the meal. Doubtless she was a good cook. However the account says, 'She was distracted with much serving.' The tense of the verb and its mood indicate that Martha was habitually this way. It seems she liked serving, and yet she was distracted by it. She suffered from something. There were elements of disorientation, dissociation.

Some people seem to be like that habitually.

After a time she could stand it no longer. She went to Jesus. In Greek, the words say, 'She came upon him'. There was something wrong about her action. The two—Jesus and Mary—were talking. Talking while the food had to be prepared!

Something like that was in Martha's mind. Conceivably, she would have liked to sit and listen, too. Such things are important: and faith is all very well—but.....meals do have to be cooked!

Or do they? Why all the fuss? If the grapevine had communicated the coming of the Master, then would not any practical woman have prepared, beforehand? Would Jesus have demanded something special? Mary did not seem to be much concerned about it. The teaching-listening pair might not even have cared for a meal at that point.

However this was Martha's 'thing'. Why shouldn't she be free to do it?

So Martha 'came upon him'. Martha bearing down on the preacher. Martha loving him, but wanting attention. Distracted people like her need to be accepted and loved. Somewhere they have not reached serenity. Being distracted with much serving is not really very practical, although it may give the impression of a certain kind of busyness. Jesus then looked up at the one who came upon him and listened to her.

She said, 'Lord, do you not care?' That was the first part of her question. Really it was an accusation. 'Do you not care?' There was reproach, the suggestion that Jesus was wrong, that he was not giving the cooking its proper place. Perhaps he was, and, deep down, perhaps Martha knew it.

Why did she reproach him? He was a guest, and not responsible for household arrangements.

She wanted him to care; truly caring is truly loving.

She went on, 'Do you not care that my sister has left me

to serve alone?’

Her accusation was a double one: Jesus was wrong—for not caring; Mary was wrong—for not helping. Her own claim was that she, Martha, was not wrong.

A theologian once said, ‘We criticise others in order to justify ourselves.’ Martha was a woman in need of justification. Any competent woman can rustle up a meal for three on short notice. But she fussed and accused. We feel for Martha. We slip into the same sorts of anger. We know the same compulsion to work; and to be noticed; and to justify ourselves.

Jesus ignored the accusations against himself and Mary. He refused to come under false guilt. His concern was for Martha. So he told her the truth. Doubtless he told her gently. ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.’ There, it was out! Martha was a worrier and a fusspot. One translation has it, ‘fussing and fretting about many things; another, ‘troubled and disturbed’.

Now we are beginning to see Martha. She has real problems. This was not the mere flying off the handle of a temporarily tired woman. Here was a person habituated in anxiety. She is insecure, feeling inferior, trying to impress, disquieted. She reminds us of the man who wrote, ‘A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh, but passion rots the bones.’ ‘Passion’ is unholy zeal. It is what they used to call ‘inordinate affection’, an overplus of intense feeling and desire. It relates to compusiveness. It makes workaholics. Martha seemed to be just that. Inside she was not at peace. Her mind was divided. She was concerned with ‘many things’. Most of us can only handle one thing at a time. Poor Martha!

Jesus went on. ‘One thing is needful’. One is enough. Choose the best one from all the others. Limit your choice to the right thing. ‘Mary has chosen the good portion.’ That is, Mary has made the true choice.

Some commentators on this passage think Jesus was showing the whole menu card, with its hors-d’oeuvres, its special soups, its entree, main course, sweets, cheese and crackers, after-dinner mints, and the coffee. ‘Mary,’ he was saying, ‘has chosen the main course. That is best.’ Fanciful? Perhaps so, but it fits the cooking-serving-eating theme.

‘Martha,’ Jesus was saying, ‘stop being involved in so much pointless doing. We are not here primarily for that. We are here to choose the deepest—the eternal—in a world which is maximising the banal, and minimising the significant.’

The main thing was that what Mary had she had for ever. ‘It shall not be taken away from her.’ What Martha had opted for had nothing of the eternal about it.

We have said little about Mary. Was she then simply the quiet type, the contemplative, even the dreamer? We do not really know. One thing we do know is that she sat at Jesus’ feet and listened. This may have been habitual. We do not know what opportunities she had at other times, but we do know she took the opportunity fully, on this occasion.

Listened. Now there’s a word with a challenge. Who listens? Who ever stops long enough to really listen? Listening is an art. It has to be practised. More, it is an attitude.

Who listens to God’s voice? Jesus often cried, ‘He who has an ear to hear, let him hear!’ Evidently you can hear but not hear: listen but not really listen. One problem with listening to God is that you hear, but it cannot stop there. To hear Him must be to obey Him, and who wants to do that!

There are genuine barriers to listening. Ours is an age of noise. We all know that. Even in Mary’s day there were noises. Pots and pans in the kitchen. The cries of children. The barking of the dogs, the braying and screeching asses.

There were little noises, murmurs, whispers. There are always noises when one would hear. Gradually we can break their tyranny, though. Gradually we come to that quiet place, close to the heart of God. Not in the storm, or the earthquake, but in the stillness, the simple, small voice. We hear something, and what we hear changes our lives, changes their actions and directions.

'I have heard the voice of God! God has spoken to me!' Perhaps He is speaking all the time. It may be that we are not hearing.

What did Martha hear? What was she listening to hear? In her distracted, disquieted and disturbed state, what *could* she hear?

Mary, in her state of calm eagerness, listened to Jesus. Now what did she hear?

Part Two

The story moves into tragedy—and joy. The eleventh chapter of John is very sad, and very wonderful. A tragedy has happened. Lazarus is dead. We had not met him, and now he is dead.

To begin with, he was ill. When he was ill, down south in Judea at Bethany, Jesus and his disciples were up north in Galilee. To the disciples that seemed the safest place. Last time in Judea the Jews had tried to stone Jesus.

The two sisters sent a message to Jesus. 'He whom you love is ill.' That would fetch Jesus. You would think so, anyway. Jesus, however, understood the illness. He was in constant contact with the Father. He knew. He said, 'This illness is not unto death: it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it.'

John adds a strange statement. He says, 'Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that he was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he

was.' How strange! He loved them, and so he stayed two days longer! Obviously he stayed so that Lazarus would die. Why, then, did he not hurry to prevent death and its sorrow? The answer is, 'Because he loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.' It seemed that death was necessary to love!

Finally, when he went, Martha met him. She told him that had he come at the right time, Lazarus would not have died. Perhaps there was reproach in her voice. Perhaps not. What she added was, 'And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, He will give you.'

What did she mean? Did she think Jesus could raise Lazarus? Hardly, for when he went to the tomb she was deeply agitated. 'Lord, he has been dead four days. By now he stinks!' One senses that she was in a state of deep yearning for Lazarus's return to life, but part of her could not really believe Jesus could or would accomplish this miracle.

Jesus said simply, 'Your brother will rise again.'

Martha did not have to interpret that this would be in the ultimate resurrection. Perhaps, nevertheless, it was safer to take it that way. Extrinsic faith has few problems. Intrinsic faith demands immediate belief that is wholly personal. Martha was orthodox, if nothing else. 'I know that he will rise in the resurrection at the last day.'

Jesus' answer was stunning. He was talking about now. He was not even asking his Father anything. He came out with the incredible truth:

'I am the resurrection and the life: he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.'

The Prince of life was standing before her. The power of the resurrection was present with her, at that moment. He needed to ask the Father nothing. In his hands was the power of life.

He looked at her. 'Do you believe this?'

She said simply, 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the

Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world.'

What was happening to Martha? Indeed what had happened to her? This was the one who had irritably rebuked Jesus. Now she saw him as very Messiah! Had his words that day made their impact? Had she thought upon them? Was this a new Martha?

Possibly. Yes, even probably this was so.

Martha was not one to sit quietly and listen. She was too nervy, too much on the go. You would have to meet her where she was. You would have to contact her with something very practical—where she was. *Jesus loved Martha and her sister Mary, and Lazarus, so when he knew Lazarus was ill he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.* He had stayed until Lazarus died, until he could come and catch Martha where she was—in loving mourning for her brother. Only in this way would she listen to him. Even then Jesus would need to do some act which would convince her.

He had done something. He had revealed himself as the Messiah, the one coming into the world. Martha could have known that before, had she sat at his feet and listened.

After that they went to the tomb. Mary was there, weeping. We trust her grief was the other side of the coin of love. However, there was another kind of grief there also. It was a grief which troubled Jesus. We are told, 'He trembled with indignation.' He wept, so to speak, from anger and frustration. He saw the noble humanity which had been fashioned by his creative hands, and was troubled.

This humanity was there at the grave, four days after the death, and some of it was grovelling before death. 'Men and women,' says the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, 'through fear of death are all their lifetime subject to bondage.'

Fear of death is an insidious and pervasive thing which spreads through the human race like some deadly virus or malignant parasite. It takes the joy out of the best of life.

The terror of death drives men and women to make their stations in life secure. No less Martha, who in her kitchen was insecure and could not bear Jesus and Mary having a moment of holy intimacy. She had to have attention. She had to feel secure.

So Jesus was angry with a clean anger.

At the same time he had his critics there. 'Why did he not come when Lazarus was sick? Why did he not heal him?' There were mean men among the mourners.

Jesus was still deeply in his indignation, and he came to the tomb. What had Mary learned at his feet? What had Martha learned on the go? It would soon be seen. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone!'

Martha's hands went to her mouth. She was terrified of the dreaded smell, the smell of human death and corruption. 'Lord, he has been dead for four days. By this time he stinks.' The stink which is the most humiliating of all—the smell of death.

Jesus looked at her. 'Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?'

She had said she believed he was the resurrection and the life. What she had not heard at Jesus' feet she could now know in his presence—he who was the Resurrection and the Life. What glory, then, would she now see? Would she now believe with utter finality? Had he made this moment so that she would and could hear? Did he love Martha and her sister, and Lazarus, and so make sure of this hour—their finest hour?

It is not difficult to picture the scene. Mary and Martha, each with some wisdom from Jesus. The mourners, some blinded with grief, others almost professional in their expression of it; some hating the death which was distasteful to them; some who were soon to be critics of the work of Jesus. They were all there and there was not much hope in the whole scene.

They rolled away the stone. Sunshine penetrated some of the murkiness. There was silence. Silence but not movement. Jesus was not intending, primarily, to glorify himself. It is the Father who must first be glorified. This he had told his disciples way up there in Galilee. Yet when the Father is glorified, so then is the Son. So then are both, and both are one.

He said, lifting his eyes on high, ‘Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard me. I knew that Thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that Thou didst send me.’

So then the action is that of the Father and the Son. The Father enables the Son.

The Son stood and cried, ‘Lazarus, come forth!’ Lazarus came forth, turgid with life, warm with his humanity, glowing with renewed being, but handicapped by the wrappings, bound in his grave-clothes. That vibrancy of being had to be loosed, and let go. And loosed and let go he was, doubtless embracing his sisters with joy, falling at Jesus’ feet, laughing and jumping and shouting and joining with the first awed, and then almost hysterical onlookers. Tears were dried, sorrow departed, grief vanished, and the sun blazed furiously over it all.

‘Many of the Jews, therefore, which had come with Mary, and had seen what he did, believed in him.’

Martha believed. She saw the glory. She knew him to be the resurrection and the life. At last she had heard. Her guilts, insecurities, disquietude and fears were suddenly banished. The strong, good woman had come into wholesome life. Jesus had caught her just where she was, not sitting at his feet, but busy in the practice of life.

Also he had loved Lazarus—giving him life. Of course he had loved Mary, but then, some time ago, she had sat at his feet, listening, understanding. What had she heard then? What had he told her?

Part Three

The final scene is one described in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John. So vivid it is that Jesus said himself that what Mary had done would become universally famous. ‘Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.’

What had she done? The scene is in the house of a leper called Simon. It seemed the man was not poor. This time the meal was a large one. Jesus and his disciples were present. Martha was serving at the tables, and there was no question of fussing and fretting. Seemingly, this was a thing of the past.

Mary, Martha’s sister, was also present. She had brought a pound of pure nard, and when we combine the three accounts of the event we see that she broke the container in which the ointment was contained, and anointed Christ’s head and his feet. The fragrance of this costly stuff filled the house. It was a beautiful and brilliant event.

It was marvellous because the ointment was extremely expensive. In fact it was ointment which a woman or a man would seek to accumulate throughout a lifetime. Because the body of a dead person would corrupt quickly in the heat, the ointment would preserve it against the death-odour until it was embalmed or buried. The cost of the substance would mean that once gathered it would be hoarded for a lifetime. The alabaster container was itself an expensive item.

We know Judas was horrified. So too were the disciples as a whole. They knew the amount of money invested in that special alabaster jar. It seems that Judas was the spokesman for the disciples. ‘Why this waste? For this ointment might have been sold for a large sum, and given to the poor.’ True enough, especially if Judas had been sincere, which he was not. John says that this man didn’t even care for the poor.

He wanted the money to put into the money-box so that he could thieve it for himself. This seemed to be his custom.

Jesus recognised the validity of the complaint, but countered it with, 'You always have the poor with you. When you want to you can do good to them. I will not always be with you. This is one occasion when someone is doing good to me. Let her do it.' Doubtless he voiced a rich principle. Sometimes it is right to be extravagant in your love. One must not be penny-pinching in affection. One must not have the shadow of a heavy legalism always peering over the shoulder. *He has given us richly all things to enjoy*, and so we ought to enjoy them. Men ought to be prodigal in their love. They ought to display a lavishness that will stun and astonish. People loved in this extravagant way will believe they are truly loved.

When God loves extravagantly—as He did at Calvary—then the defeated take courage, the despairing are brought to faith, and the crushed are revived. Prodigal love.

Jesus saw to the heart of the matter. Truly Mary was displaying her love, but her love was wholly practical. Jesus explained it, and revealed the person Mary was.

He said, 'She has done a beautiful thing to me.' He meant she had spoken her love from her own heart to his. It was even something he needed. It was no wasteful gesture. He required that anointing. He said, 'She has anointed me *beforehand for my burial*.' Whatever could he mean by such a statement? One Gospel puts it in a slightly different form: 'She has done it to prepare me for my burial.' He was saying, 'I need human preparation for the coming event.' But how could this be? Surely the Son of God could handle his own matters without needing the fellowship of a woman?

The plain fact is that Jesus welcomed the fellowship of a woman, of a human person, in the matter of his death. What she had done was beautiful. Mark records, 'She has anointed me beforehand for burying.' The words puzzle

readers. Why should Jesus be delighted at this principle? Was it not, in some sense, morbid?

The whole matter makes no sense until we realise two things. The first is that none of his followers had taken his death into account. The second is that they had no idea of the meaning or value of his death. It has to be said that his constant mentions of the Cross troubled them. They sought to ignore his predictions of his own death. They clung to their images of what and who Messiah ought to be. In their thinking, death had no part.

In a way we can understand, and even sympathise. The disciples had followed Jesus because their Scriptures spoke of the grandeur of the Christ. He was to be the true Prince. Of his Kingdom there would be no end. He would triumph over his enemies. He would set up a heavenly imperial State. The nations of the world would bow down to him. He would be the Son of Man too, the Man of Daniel chapter seven. All kingdoms would be subject to him. The saints of the Most High—his multitude of followers—would also receive the Kingdom.

It was not that the apostles saw only a political Kingdom. The Kingdom—when it came—would be one of righteousness, and not troublesome politics. Righteousness would prevail, and pleasant godliness. Justice would reign. There would be no poor, and no cruel rich. Hence they looked to Jesus to suddenly use his wonderful powers, take over the reign at Jerusalem, expel the Romans, and finally rule the world.

But he spoke of death.

At least three times in one Gospel (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:32) Jesus predicted his own death. He spoke of it in strong terms, pointing out that it was not only *inevitable* as the prophets had taught, but it was primarily *indispensable*. That is, God could not, and would not, complete His plan without the Cross. In it lay the mystery of His purposes.

Messiah himself must die.

The scene on the Mount of Transfiguration indicates this powerfully. Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John. With him also were Moses and Elijah, and they appeared in glory. The three conversed whilst the disciples listened. The two great leaders of Israel spoke with Jesus about 'his *exodus* which he was to *accomplish* at Jerusalem.' Jesus was to be the new Moses, and the new Joshua, to take his people out of bondage into liberty. The death then is purposeful. It had to happen.

Coming down from that Mount Jesus talked again of his impending death. 'Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men.' Luke records, 'But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, that they should not perceive it; *and they were afraid to ask him about this saying.*'

They were afraid. They dreaded the idea of his death. Yet he had told them that if they would be his disciples they must be prepared to take up their cross daily. That is, they must be identified with the principle of the Cross. This principle meant shame, rejection, and ultimately, perhaps, death.

So the group sealed itself against the idea of Messiah's death. There was only one who did not. She thought much of his death. She thought about him having to go to his death. She knew the event was of the utmost importance. The church with hindsight and historical proof knows how important is that death, but the group of followers would not even let themselves think of it. The term, for them, contained an inherent contradiction.

Mary had a few basic thoughts about it. She saw the death as necessary. She saw it as a significant event. She saw also the fact that Jesus was going to it alone; no disciple was going to share it with him. Not one would think in terms of celebrating that death. Mary saw it as worthy of celebration

She wanted to encourage him. She wished to share in the event and show him she understood.

The Gospels tell their own story, under the comments of Jesus:

- 'She has done a beautiful thing to me.'
- 'She has done what she could.'
- 'She has done it to prepare me for my burial.'
- 'She has anointed my body beforehand for burying.'

Judas said, in effect, 'She has not used all the ointment. We can sell what remains and still have money for the poor.'

Jesus said, 'Let her alone: let her keep it for the day of my burial.'

Mary, then, was ministering to Christ by celebrating his death before it even happened. She was encouraging him to go to that death. She was, somehow, sharing the event with him. When it would happen she would also share at that time. To her, the death was the thing paramount, highly significant.

How significant? History has answered that question. Significant because he bore our sins in his body on the Tree. Significant because God made the crucified Messiah *to be sin* for us. No sin is there which was not borne, no anguish which did not become his: 'He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows'.

This the disciples had not seen. Come Pentecost and they were ablaze with the message. 'Jesus is Lord! He is risen from the grave. He is greater than death. He is greater than sin. He has defeated all evil. Believe, repent, and receive the forgiveness of sins.'

How come, then, that this woman had seen and understood? How was it that Mary had comprehended, before the event of the Cross, that it was significant?

'Now Mary sat at Jesus' feet, and listened.'

This is the truth of Mary. The moral is too obvious to require much pointing. Someone listened: someone heard. Heard? Yes. and perhaps the most significant matter the world has known.

Epilogue

‘Some women of our company amazed us,’ two disciples told a traveller they had met on the road to Emmaus. ‘They were at the tomb early this morning, and did not find his body. They came back saying they had even seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive.’

‘Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and *the other Mary*’ went to see the sepulchre...’

Who was ‘the other Mary’? Mark 16:1 records Mary Magdalene and ‘Mary, the mother of James’. Was this ‘the other Mary’? We do not know. It may have been Martha’s sister. In one sense Mary had no great need to go. She had joyfully celebrated the death in the days before it had happened.

Acts 1:12–14 speaks of the disciples in the Upper Room, awaiting the event of Pentecost. ‘All these [disciples], *together with the women* and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers...’ Was Mary of Bethany with them?

When the day of Pentecost was fully come... Then it happened. Men and women were both filled with the Spirit. In that hour they came to know the truth, fully. It flooded into them. They joyfully told ‘the wonderful works of God’. They knew now the great truth of his death and resurrection.

Was Mary one of those anointed and filled with the Spirit? Did she too come to that full understanding of the truth of Christ crucified?

More than them all, she had known. Even without the

coming of the Spirit she had listened.

Where she had been, as she celebrated the death, the fragrance had filled the whole house. Now the Spirit was to take that fragrance to the whole world.

‘She has done a beautiful thing to me.’

AGOG WITH GOD

He kept his eyes fixed on the line of progress, the distant but unseen goal of the white bird in which he was flying. Hogi, the tall blond pilot, had a keen but practical view of the same flight. He was not staring, only seeing with an easy confidence habitual to him. Many times he had flown the same route, the simple overflight where the jungle was thick and cramped together below. He and Hogi could see sudden outbreaks of crimson below them, riotous, tumbling blossoming of the rain tree or the forest flame tree.

The 'plane kept plowing the air, crisp furrows of light cloud turning and slipping by. Hogi was in control, his instruments telling him about altitude and air-pressure, and direction and speed, and keeping their agreement with his strong, gentle fingers. They obeyed as though that were the only will they cared to have. They kept the steady pressure against the air, breasting it ceaselessly, unremittingly.

In the rear of the cockpit the two missionaries slept. They had fallen into the habit months earlier. It seemed years ago. Always sleep in the 'plane. Be tired above the jungle. Sleep to the roar of the single engine. Catch up with weariness. Stop thinking and find repose.

Hogi was finding holes in the clouds, but the white mistiness had no deadliness lurking in it. It was all too gentle to have an electric impact, a thunder-head of any dynamic. If it was bluffing at all it was with its very blandness.

They broke out of the regular sight of churning green, the heavy cauliflower surge of jungle tree tops massed closely together. Grass-green breaks appeared, lighter in colour than the chunky turbulence of the matted jungle-growth.

The tip of the 'plane ferreted out the streams of cleared country until the lake itself appeared supported like a crenellated cup above the level of the jungle, an upraised vessel showing its silver softness and beckoning the 'plane to come down, to tip towards it.

The 'plane dipped its salute to the still, glistening water, shaking its head to one side and then cocking it to the other. 'Hello! Hello!' it roared steadily. 'We are coming again!' it said in an even, official voice. 'Prepare yourself,' it said, 'for our perfect landing.' Its sparkling wings dipped and turned as it flew over the brown of the *attap* huts. It swerved and circled out over the lake. It prepared itself and came roaring in to the sodden airstrip. It landed happily, sedately, most royally.

Chunky, solid, and fiercely happy, sporting intensely masculine beards to complement their proud fuzzy heads, the small brown men came breathlessly to where the 'plane stopped. The engine chugged out its last message and then coughed significantly. The propeller froze its action abruptly.

'Well, well, well!' said Hogi as they climbed out.

The missionaries had awakened. They were back in the only reality they knew. Blond missionary children hooted welcome, whilst brown arms and legs of young Danis flailed in sheer excitement. The older men had a simple sophistication. They understood it all and felt no need for comment.

When a fierce cloud had up-ended itself over the strip, sending the group helter-skelter to the hangar, the sun came out to warm the moisture and make the sweat trickle freely. Hogi strode about the hangar as some blond human god, with his small blonde goddess-daughter in his arms. She had a Scandinavian joy to share with the Irian chocolate, the chunky chocolate of the nuggety Danis.

The mechanical canoe slipped its moorings and bore out quietly into the lake. It had calm insouciance. It always ac-

cepted graciously the blatant overloading of luggage and humans. It prowed its way towards the other jetty whilst the brown-skinned and muscled Dani guided it with quiet consciousness. He glided it in beside the jetty until the engine coughed softly and was still.

The human hubbub arose naturally enough. It grasped luggage and loved ones and bore it all towards the attap buildings. It rejoiced in the good things in bundles, the shiny Western things which overflowed with promise. The Dani men and women accepted this planned invasion with quiet pride, calm acceptance, wise as to the manner of the times.

He, for his part, questioned none of it, introspected nothing of it, sometimes letting it glide by, sometimes gliding along with it.

The missionaries interested him. The small family groups merged at tables, eating together, a conglomerate of petty kingdoms. The mystery of the future lay in the intelligent eyes of the children. The steady brilliance of their own parents was about to be overleapt. The tentacles of their minds—the minds of the little ones—were already touching new things, making fresh understandings. Some of the parents were awkward as they opened tins of food and grasped with their feverished minds the techniques of translation, the ponderables of phonemics and phonetics. They kept their minds on many things, half-here at the conference centre and partly where the jungle concealed their usual location. Loneliness and busyness blended in interesting amalgams.

In the attap auditorium they were massed together in a fearsome glacier, minds and bodies packed together, wedged tightly in one as a defence against the theological onslaught he let loose upon them. His mind was stacked with knowledge, with wisdom ancient and modern. He had insights old and new—given insights of course, primary and secondary revelations. He had supplies of words to hand,

phrases and clauses, sentences and paragraphs, rolling panoramas that moved by, past their minds, seeking the way to their hearts.

They sat, stock-still, not resisting but then not receiving. He had a sigh in him as he spoke and they a sigh as they listened. Expectancy and awareness are the gifts for the giving and receiving of life. The communications rolled on towards them and they met each impact with an experienced stability. They met it without receiving fully and without rejecting wholly.

Outside the nuggety indigenes went about the rounds of centuries, planting, sowing, harvesting, hunting the vagrant pig, hawking produce. They were unsophisticated but wise. They tasted the ordinary to the last drop so that it was transmuted into the extraordinary whilst still remaining commonplace.

Songs rose and hovered about the auditorium, the guest-houses and the homes of the workers and missionaries.

The bustle of life recommenced when the explications concluded. In the water, swimming, or in the room, writing, or at the table, drinking coffee, the massed thoughts he had given them, the strong regiments he had set in motion marched relentlessly on, into their minds—sometimes capturing the citadels of the hearts and even taking captive old areas of feeling, entrenched concepts and tradition. The Kingdom of God was overtaking the past—even the good past—and the new worlds were unfolding.

Images began to change, the images which control the thinking, acting, and living of persons. Images which may well have begun in the womb, developed at birth and matured into fixed patterns of belief and principial living. The image of God born of the parents, and further compounded through familial relationships, an image good or bad, helpful or harmful, touching the inner nerve-centres of knowing and willing and feeling. With this is the concealed

mystery of heredity, environment and the multifarious circumstances, tiny and gargantuan.

Within the stock of the glacier, the stolid, inert avalanche, were the early movements and motions, the shaping and reshaping of images and functional hierarchies. The single unity of the undivided God, the dynamic unity of love was making itself known afresh and causing the ripples, the movements, the fractures, the new forms, the integrating Spirit finding free areas for work and energising.

Meeting succeeded meeting, and the chocolate people slipped along their muddy trails, or sang in curious melody as they harmonised with the lush greenness, the ebullient fruitfulness, the perpetual fecundity. In the midst of traditional worship an even deeper worship was growing. The dynamisms within the seemingly congealed mass were making their powers felt. There was in fact no inertia of the mass but simply a concealed inner power. The whole must move for the components to achieve action. The components must energise the whole for its movements.

With a quiet sigh it began to happen. He noticed its scarcely traceable beginnings. There was first a gentle reception, a tacit, simple acknowledgment, a taking into itself, the giving up of passive defence. Slowly the mass began to move, though almost imperceptibly. The camp had awakened. There was slight singing in anticipation of the adventure.

He realised the images were changing. The idols were losing their dominion, and falling dumbly before the new image, the second sight of 'the brightness of His glory and the express image of His Person'. True Godliness was capturing humanity to its genuine authentic being. Man was again becoming man, so that the capturing love was itself captive and servant to love for all men.

At that point he knew his flight in the great silver bird was authenticated, if this indeed had ever been needed. God

needs no authentication, he thought, yet is always being authenticated since all His works praise Him. There were the hours when he talked, when he was allowed to peer down into hearts and know the changing of the images and the ultimate capture of those hearts by love. The new understanding of the Eternal Glory was also the new understanding of man.

Outside, the rains kept coming. They had been coming and going, drenching and ceasing. They fell out of voluminous skies, making trickles, creeks and rivers. They soaked the tall jungle giants, the full foliage of the palms and the vines and the shrubs. They had cleansed and purified and purged and freshened until all was renewed and without pollution.

So it was with the deluge of the wise word, the word and the words, the compelling commands and the enlivening promises. All stagnancy was dispelled. All backwaters flowed afresh, all slack streams surged into roaring rivers, all thought plunged into a huge lake, a widening sea, an ocean for all peace and serenity, for all assurance and tranquillity.

Eyes brightened; hearts beat strongly and ever proudly. The eagles of thought quivered and flashed above their high eyries. Minds moved into new realms, pivoted where they had hung slackly. Flights were made and on their return wisdom had enlarged beautifully. Secrets were laid open and disbelief was dissolved.

The freshness spread through the dulled nerves, the lined minds, the weary bodies, giving renewed understanding, vitalised vocation, new spontaneous performance. If they only glanced at him in passing it was because they had looked in him and through him to where everything lay and where the love leapt out and spread through the whole. No longer was their mass an inertia. It was not mere movement nor separate atomistic dynamism, but the true power of the

whole.

It would move through the jungles. It would race on the wheels of love, the chariots of full affection. It would capture the caves and the hamlets, the hills and the deep valleys. It would draw all into the ultimate harmony which had always been waiting—silently and in hope—for its final climactic fulfilment. He knew this was how it was; how it had been; and how it was destined to be.

The eyes were brown, and the eyes were blue. Skin pink and chocolate; blond and bright brown; rippling or firm and steady. Hands touching, eyes meeting, fearless looking and revealing from deep within.

The exchange, the interchange. Cries and murmurs, tears and laughter. Loads hoisted, baggage clutched in hands. Canoes gliding, canoes skimming; water rippling, waves washing. The roar of 'copter and 'plane. The surging of hearts, the waving of hands.

Blond pilot exchanged for pilot of the steel-blue eyes and crisp foaming hair. Strong hands on the joy-stick, resting firmly on the rudder. Down below the Chunky chocolate, agog with God.

The white 'plane, the silver bird, wings dipping, wings set, surging forward, strong pressure as it breasted the resistant air, the spume-clouds, the mist masses, the topped turbulence of cumulus, and then soaring high.

Not higher than the inner soaring. Not more powerful in its surging than the strong, deep thrust of the heart, but surging and soaring nevertheless.

And always moving to where it was being sent, being guided.

LET BE WHAT ALWAYS WAS AND IS

There is, it is, as it has always been
And always will be.
As it was, is now and shall be;
And yet it is always becoming.
Once when it was not, it was,
Because of the Word,
And the mind of the Word.

Time at the last extrajects
What was before it, before space
And before the consciousness
Which we in our minute wisdom think
Is because we are aware of it,
Because we seek to classify,
Comprehend and categorise.

Common sense gives the scornful lie
To the utterance, 'What was has always been,
And always will be, though becoming
What it was, and is, and so will be.'
Common sense cannot be denied.
It lies within its own province.
Its truth is invincible
For the common man splendid
With his own mindfulness.

Yet the 'always was' was before
The Ineffable brought to light
'Out of nothing' (we say), but to the Word.

‘Out of things which do not [did not] appear.’
 This latter is not nothing, nothing only
 When we call that which appears,
 ‘Something’.

The Word, uttered out of Itself (Himself).
 And what was not in Time and Space
 Appeared. It did not become, except to Time,
 Except to Space, and so to vaulted comprehension.
 Yet comprehension does not authenticate,
 And by no possible conception initiates
 The idea that what was must pass,
 Yet being what will be
 Is the foundation of all Time–Space’s sanity.

The esoterics, the gnostics and the mystics
 View in their epistemology
 To make *non est* that which appears,
 Or give it Platonic symbolism—
 The shadows cast by the reality,
 Indicating, but not the reality itself.
 A decent sort of explanation
 Decked with dear words,
 As the case may be—words delectable,
 Mysterious and obscure: the bubblings
 Of the crass inane withinness—guessing.

Nor do I know—as crass as all,
 Inane as any—I know not
 How the visible is invisible,
 The so-called temporal eternal.
 All I know is that the Divine Unity
 Is indivisible. Evil cannot fissiparate
 What is the product and the flower of love
 Made visible, all of the Alpha and the Omega

From Beginning to the End, but always
 The expression and the reality
 Of the Ineffable Eternal.

Hence when the immolating love
 Burns with its own full fervent heat,
 The very elements—all dissolving—
 What shall emerge from the holy holocaust
 Is that which ever was, but was to be
 In the Divine testing, the perfect purging,
 The creative Word proving its own
 Eternal In the end product, true from the beginning
 In the Mind, yes, but also in the Motion
 Of the Ever-being Father.

THIS MAN WAS FORGIVEN

There was nothing if not hostility in that house. When you say hostility, of course it was not openly aggressive. It was at the best silent and veiled. At the worst it was a hard, underlying opposition, silent and inflexible. One glance at the clothing, the stance of the people, their regular and even mien, and you knew the situation as it really was.

The place was packed, of course. No room for others to enter. Only a few moments earlier someone had tried the door. They had kept it closed until then, sealed by the heavy latch. Some had peered out, wondering what the problem was. Well, the problem was four men carrying a light stretcher-type bed such as you might see anywhere. Caretakers used them at night and poor folk often carried them to the roof of the house when the night heat was intolerable. Few there were who had not, at one time or another, lain in the night breeze, grateful for such a bed, light and easy to be carried.

On the bed had been a man. Not a pretty sight, you might say. His face was white and pasty. The reddish skin seemed dimmed under its white, fixed surface. It was smooth, flaxlike, unwrinkled. No sign of a muscle, and this over all the body. The limbs were loose, unflexed, inert. In the bony skull the eyes peered out of the passive face.

The crowd in the house had rejected the bed and the man on principle. Already the place was crowded. Overcrowded in fact, and the day itself was warm enough without adding heat to it. The four men carrying the bed had looked frustrated, almost angry. Doubtless they were friends of the helpless paralytic.

They kept talking about the Master and how he would heal their friend. That stirred a little anger in the audience. If there was anything they disliked above another it was playing fast and loose with the supernatural. There were certain things God gave to man, such as His law and covenant, and beyond that He rarely went. In old times, with an occasional prophet or two, He had interrupted the ordinary course of nature, but the situation had to be a pressing one. There were the rare instances of Israel, Egypt and the plagues, while the later events such as those of Elijah, Elisha and their miracles were fair proofs that God cared for Israel. However, surely these things were not required as in the days of old?

They were polite as they closed the door and fixed the latch. The Galilean teacher was expected shortly and they were waiting to listen to him. They would soon test his abilities and see whether the reports were true or false.—The teacher, when he arrived, caused quite a buzz. Some of them were muttering in their beards, and the atmosphere, if anything, tightened. Looking around it could be seen that these men were pundits of the law, experts in legal and moral matters.

The Pharisees were there of course, and their scribes. Lawyers had come also, and all to hear the Nazarene. They made no bones about it. Could they believe all they had heard? If so, then on the one hand he must be an outstanding Teacher and Healer. On the other, there were reports which indicated that he was a rabble-rouser, a disturber of Judaic peace, and one who wished to abrogate the ancient and holy law of God.

Something about the Teacher was evident that day. The man who first wrote of this event described it this way: '*The power of the Lord was with him to heal.*' It seemed that although he often healed, this was to be a special time of healing. Did the gathered audience feel it that way, or had

someone reported healings prior to this time of teaching? It is not known, but what his chroniclers call 'virtue' was evidently with him. Doubtless the human race is interested, even impressed wherever one of its own company gives evidence of this power. It is doubtful, however, that the assembled group had primarily come for that purpose.

We are told that these legal people had come from 'every village of Galilee, and Judea, and from Jerusalem'. That was indeed a wide coverage. Unkind folk would have reported them as nit-pickers, doctrinal flea-hunters and theological fault-finders. More generous minds would have spoken of them as defenders of true faith and practice, and sincere opposers of fanciful innovators. Doubtless both elements were present, although we are not informed in what proportions. What we do know is that every person was seeking to discover the value—or lack of it—of the man Jesus.

The session began. Jesus began to teach. Folk craned forwards. Maybe some took notes.

It was about this time that the noise began above, in the roof. Naturally all eyes looked up, and as naturally, the preacher paused. Flakes fell from the roof. Cracking, splitting noises were heard. Light began to show through the ceiling-roof.

Most comprehended in a flash. Tiles were being removed. People, for some reason, were anxious to get into the meeting. They too wished to listen to the man. The crowd below sighed and was a little impatient. They had scarcely caught the trend of what he was saying before this irritating interruption.

To their surprise and chagrin the gap in the roof enlarged, the shaft of light widened, and then as suddenly diminished. Movement and scuffling were heard above, and suddenly the light bed was being lowered. The four bearers had not taken 'No!' for an answer. They were lowering their burden

by means of ropes.

Then suddenly it was on the floor. People had pressed back. Room had been made. The man looked up at Jesus, whilst his friends, kneeling on the broken edges of the roof, were peering down at him.

Perhaps a smile played at the edges of Jesus' lips as he looked up. He could see the sense of urgency on the faces of the friends. He could also see faith, and this was what he was seeking to find. He gave a half-nod of satisfaction.

He looked down at the paralysed man. Then he spoke.

His words were warm, encouraging, commanding. 'Son,' he said, 'buck up, your sins are forgiven.'

Was there a slight gasp from the friends above? Was this what they had expected? Had they not hoped for healing and yet did they see forgiveness as relevant and indeed necessary? We do not know. Certainly none of this was expected by these lawyer-theologians. To the contrary they found it unacceptable. It needed only this definitive statement about forgiveness to set them off. If they had considered before that the Nazarene was wrong in doctrine and practice, now they knew he was indeed deeply in error.

'Every Jew,' they reasoned, 'should know that forgiveness comes only through the Temple, and at that, only through the bloody sacrifices.' Many a good word in the Law spoke of forgiveness through the offerings. Indeed almost all things were cleansed by such, and without the shedding of blood was no authentic remission of sins. It was outrageous for a mere teacher to claim authority to forgive sins. Whilst it was true that the prophets had promised a time when forgiveness would come to Israel—even apart from the sacrifices—yet this was taking the matter too far. No man could assume the authority which was God's prerogative alone.

They voiced their thoughts, one to another. 'Who is this that speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sin but God

only?’

For a man to presume to forgive sin would be, of course, blasphemy. Of that there was no doubt. Jesus was a man. No person doubted that. But what kind of man? This is the pivotal point of the story. Without doubt these lawyer-theologians from all of Palestine had gathered to settle the matter of his claims. He had claimed in many ways, and on a number of occasions, to be a man sent by God. Indeed his assertion could be no less than that he was Messiah, or, as he was about to say, ‘Son of man.’

Now supposing he were ‘Son of man’—would he not then have authority to forgive sins? Daniel 7:13–27 spoke of one ‘like a Son of man’, and to him was given ‘dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not be destroyed.’ Also ‘judgement was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints received the Kingdom.’

It is evident that the Son of man has power of death and life, and the power of judgement. Who, then, but he can forgive sins under the Ancient of Days, the Most High? The point is that the critics had come to assess the claims of the Nazarene precisely because they were high claims. Now they did not even concede *the possibility* but assumed the impossibility of the claim. It would have been better for them to suspend judgement and see whether the man could effect such forgiveness. A positive spirit would have at least allowed the possibility that the claim was true.

Jesus left them in no doubt that their judgement was precipitate, premature, and wrong. He first attacked their attitude as being wholly wrong. ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts?’ he asked. Some might feel this to be harsh. Surely their orthodoxy was commendable? Perhaps so, but what then of the prophetic predictions and expectations? Indeed this, as we have said, was the whole point and purpose

of their being present.

Jesus was relentless. ‘Which is easier to say. “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Rise and walk”?’

Doubtless having said this his eyes swept his sceptical and hostile audience. He then put the situation fully before them. ‘That you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins,’—he then said to the paralytic—‘Rise, take up your bed, and go home.’

Whatever the outcome was to be, the crowd must have been gripped. Already we have noted Luke’s statement: ‘And the power of the Lord was with him to heal (5:17). Surely what Jesus, then, should have said was, ‘That you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to heal sickness...’ But no. The Hebrew mind understood the connection between sin and sickness. Psalm 32:3–4 is the classic statement of a sinner (David) who would not confess his sin. Sealing it over with obdurate refusal to acknowledge it, he found it became a dangerous, even highly explosive power which brought him into bodily suffering and sickness.

‘When I declared not my sin, my body
wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night Thy hand was heavy
upon me:
my strength was dried up as by
the heat of summer.’

Likewise Psalm 31:10 has it:

‘For my life is spent with sorrow
and my years with sighing:
my strength fails because of my iniquity
and my bones waste away.’

These writers are not speaking figuratively, but literally and accurately. Their bones actually ache with guilt! Psalm 38 is a powerful example of this experience.

This then gives meaning to the cry of David in Psalm 103:

'Bless the Lord. O my soul:
and all that is within me
bless His holy name!
Bless the Lord, O my soul.
and forget not all His benefits,
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases.

The last couplet is Hebraic parallelism in poetic form. Forgiveness and healing are the one. True, there are occasions when sickness is not at all linked with sin. Jesus makes this clear in John 9:1–3. Jesus said that the man afflicted with blindness was not blind because he or his parents had sinned, but rather that the glory of God might be shown through his healing. Nevertheless when he healed the man beside the pool of Beth-zatha (John 5:1–14), he spoke these words to him: 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you.' The inference is that sin would bring sickness, as it already had done.

The crowd, then, with such theology in mind, stared at the paralysed man, concentrating on what might happen to him.

In fact they had no time to wait. The action was instantaneous. The sick man was no longer in his pallid, flaccid state. His unhealthy colour beneath the pallor of his skin had changed. Muscles rippled into life. The eyes, from being hot and unnaturally shining, now changed to a healthful, determined eagerness. They were bright but not feverishly so.

The man rose. Incredibly he rose. He stood for a moment on the bed, leaped down from it, picked up the light frame and resolutely lifted it. Up it went, up and on to his head.

There was a large intake of breath from the audience. a vast audible sigh. The implications were enormous. This man being healed was assuredly forgiven! This man being

forgiven, the other man Jesus was surely the Son of man, and Daniel chapter seven was in enactment. This was the Cosmocrator, the Ruler of the Kingdom, this man from Nazareth.

Something happened in that group. The cramped, scholastic legal spirit was expanding. Law they knew well, but here they knew it better to the accompaniment of grace and love, forgiveness and healing.

Of course the people were in a frenzy of joy. Forgiveness is that theme of all themes which sets the feet of men a-tapping and which lightens their minds and hearts to a happy ecstasy. Of course forgiveness liberates and causes the tongue to cry out: 'Bless the Lord, O my soul...who forgives all thy iniquity...'

Suddenly the audience roared. Doubtless it was strange and unusual for stolid and wooden law-doctors, and staid, reserved Pharisees, but they did it. They began to praise God and give Him great glory. Doubtless too the friends on the roof capered over the tiles in a passion of joy, lifted their hands and danced without inhibition.

And then, of course, there was the man. He too—he more than others—was filled with a wonderful joy. Virtues—that great power of God—had flooded his body, making it whole, thrusting out the unwelcome disease, renewing every fibre and filament of his being. It not only renewed the body but the heart and the mind and the spirit of the man, for he was forgiven.

There had been no room for the men to bring in the bed. There was plenty of room to get it out! The man walked resolutely, bed held high, heading for the doorway. Latch was unloosed, door opened wide, the man making his way into the light of day.

Off he went, at first walking, then running and even jumping. He was headed towards his home and family to tell them great news. His voice was crying out, 'Glory!' and

he was shouting, 'Praise be to God!' Praise indeed to Him who heals and forgives.

Rumour has it that he passed by a man named Levi (or, Matthew). and that this man saw all the glory of it. We cannot be sure, but we do know that shortly afterwards the Nazarene passed by his office and called him to follow. We are told there was no hesitation but immediate response.

Be that as it may, the healed man ran on, his bed jumping up and down upon his head in the same rhythm as the man who jumped and leaped, and cried and shouted. He laughed and wept alternately, and as he ran he gave vent to his great cries of joy and praise.

Doubtless too, many a time, in a happy, repetitive rhythm he sang,

'Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me
bless His holy name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all His benefits,
who has forgiven all thy iniquity,
and healed all thy diseases.'

Had not Jesus said to him, 'My son! Buck up! Your sins are forgiven you'?

THREE RICE CAKES

He lay on his bed, looking up at the attap. At night rats would scurry through the rotting woven palm strands. He thought, dreamily, 'Three Jap dollars for a fat rat.' Three dollars would buy a mite of towgay. Towgay was a delicious morsel. He could sense the taste-buds watering in anticipation. He turned a little in his bed to ease his pain.

His thoughts were vagrant, gone from the attap and the price of rats set by the few Yankee prisoners. He was thinking about other things, and not only about food. Whenever his mind moved back to his central problem the line of grey fear returned. He felt a kind of mental nausea. He wanted to evade this kind of thinking, as though his mind would vomit if he pressed the enquiry.

The enquiry! The thought was faintly ironic, quietly mocking him. Who was he to conduct moral investigation? He stirred uneasily as the pictures came to him—each one, as it were, being passed through a magic lantern. They were pictures which wearied him as they presented themselves to him, endlessly. The procession went on unceasingly, day by day, week by week. He would have liked to shut them all off but they flickered on, continuing their pressing demands.

When had it all commenced? He thought tiredly about that. Back in the jungle, then on the Island. Through the streets, back where the rubber plantations grew in their regular rows, drained by ditches, filled with shadows, dappled where the brilliant sunshine flooded the light leaves, breaking through the grey boles and branches, falling across the gashes from which the rubber lactate flowed.

In all these places he had heard the cry in times of

desperation: 'Every man for himself! They're coming!'

That cry had always troubled him. Why not stay together? Why divide up? Why be single and self-minded? It had puzzled him. Once he had been alone himself—wounded, lying out in the grey dawn, the blood pumping from a large wound in his shattered thigh. The rich red flow had fascinated him. He had watched the life flow away, not daring to move because of the snipers in the trees. One movement and death would have thudded into him. So he had lain, uncaring as death approached in its natural but gentle way. He had not feared death.

He had been alone, but they had come to fetch him. The falling mortars still kicked the grey earth and the mould of dead rubber leaves, but they had not cared. He could still hear the rasping sobs of their breath as they had wept and cursed, holding him in his good and broken parts, taking him away to restoration.

So he had not been alone. He could never remember that without immense joy. Death as it was coming had not troubled him. In a quiet way he would have welcomed it. Yet he had longed for the link with living humanity. He had wanted to feel the warm, fleshly touch, even if only to bid it farewell.

Now he sighed. There had been a silent, unuttered cry in the days of their prison life. It was muted of course, as though men were ashamed to articulate it. It was the same cry, but whispered only in the mind. It said, 'It is still every man for himself!'

He knew that men were haunted by men. Each day as they rose and dragged their limbs to the urine bowl, to the places of washing, and to the meagre gruel that helped them begin the day, the spectre of self-preservation haunted them. They tried in their various ways to pretend the hateful thing was not among them. They tried pathetic subterfuges of pretence, small actions of altruism, but their hearts were not in

them. Hunger dictated heavily. Death was a sombre spectre, a dark carrion creature glooming about them, confronting them with imminent loss of dignity.

Dignity! How they sought to retain it in the motions of the life they eked out. They tried to hold up the body, to cause the limbs to walk properly, or hang truly. They tried to give a sparkle to the eyes, or to feign an unfelt jauntiness. It was as though the prince in every man was making its tired protest, claiming the ancient royalty of the human race, even as it was bowed down by the indignity of imprisonment and human cruelty. In the moment of its humiliation it was stirred to ancient pride.

Why did he think these thoughts, watch this procession of changing pictures? Why did he hesitate to reach his own conclusions? He knew full well that the conclusions were too apparent to be evaded much longer. The facing of them could mean bitterness, emptiness, a grey and dull future, an endless, hopeless living. That is why he had drawn back from the ultimate thought.

He threw his weak legs over the edge of the bed, staring down at their grey pellagrous skin. The flesh hung, weak and lifeless. The wrinkled texture of them was like the scabrous hide of an elephant. The feet, however, were tight with edema. The flesh was shining, soft as that of a new babe, preternaturally firm. The ankles too were taut with the excess body fluid.

He placed his feet on the floor, took his walking stick and gripped the haft of the Thomas splint. He raised himself painfully. Somewhere a gong was sounding. The midday meal was waiting. He fumbled for his tin cup, his chipped enamel plate, and made his way along the verandah, shuffling along with all the shufflers.

Some had a better tread than his. There were the few who had no beriberi. Their bodies had a good look, in some cases a sleek look. That look was envied by some, and hated

deeply by others. Some envied and hated in the one motion. The sleek ones, of course, were those deeply in the rackets. Some of them were intrepid black-marketeers. They made their way through the barbed-wire at nights, or bribed the guards, or waited until there was a break in the patrol. Intrepid was the word, and they earned their health and the life they so eagerly preserved. What troubled him and others was their callous disregard for the starving ones, the dying ones, the helpless ones. He wondered vaguely what he himself might have done had he not been wounded. How often he had shuddered at his helplessness.

Sometimes in the night he had wondered what might happen if the Allies were to come and attempt to release them. He could see the flurry of activity, the dreadful mistakes, the horrible confusion. He had imagined the cries of the freshly wounded as the mounted machine-guns stuttered their insistence on much death. There was the returning memory of broken limbs, mangled flesh, tortured bodies.

And him! What would he do? Drag his useless leg into a tree and sit there, hoping the chattering guns would not speak against him or reach him in the branches.

He smiled faintly as he dragged himself to the mess hut. There were apathetic greetings from his fellow sergeants. The troops were lined up at their mess tables, handing out their bowls for the shadow-soup, cups for the black tea, and taking one small rice cake as they passed through.

Inside the hut the sergeants seated themselves. They had filled their cups with tea and received their small ladles of thin soup. On plates in the centre of each table were the simple rice cakes. One mouthful to one rissole would be a fair estimate, but he knew that each would be savoured. Tiny bites, nibbles really, were what they would take. Slow, lingering mastication would seem to add size and savour to the plain fried ball of rice.

The man beside him was his friend. How often they had

talked about it all. Both of them, when captured, had been men of faith—simple, earnest, primary faith. That was long ago. It was too long ago. Much of the joy and assurance of faith had faded. For him it was now the end of faith—or close to it.

Terry was the man who sat beside him. Terry had been like him, hurt by human selfishness, surprised by the vicious spirit of self-preservation, stunned by the cruelty it raised and the callousness it bred. Terry, even more than he, had become scornful, critical, then bitter. Finally he had become cynical.

He had tried to turn Terry from these disasters. Once he had said doggedly, 'It's like turning into a Pharisee. It's just so self-righteous.'

Terry had not seen it that way. 'No man has the right to live by dealing death to others,' he had said.

He knew what Terry meant. He meant the racketeers within the camp. The hangers-on around the cook, the buying of favours, the thieving of rations, the filching of medical supplies, the bartering of goods with cruelty, the battering upon fearful unfortunates. All of this had embittered Terry, who otherwise was a man of resilient faith. In a way, of course, his scorn was healthy. But then his bitterness was deadly to a happy spirit.

He sat staring for a moment at the rice cakes. No matter how depressed he was, he would always sip away at his soup, savouring the faint taste of green vegetables. 'Shadow-soup,' they called it, and he smiled faintly at that thought. The shadow of the vegetables had passed over.

Today the soup lay in his bowl until Terry touched his elbow. 'Drink up,' he said gently. 'You mustn't dream.'

But dream he did, and suddenly the dream was a nightmare. It was the climax he had always dreaded. It was like some dark, sickening horror coming towards him, approaching him to grip and threaten and destroy. Even at the

last moment he tried to evade the conclusion to which he had been coming.

His mind was saying. 'There is no law because there is no God. Where there is no law and no God *nothing matters*.' It was the last phrase which horrified him: 'Nothing matters.' The horror of it sickened him. All these months—was it only months?—these eighteen months he had battled for faith, and in a way incomprehensible had kept integrity even when he had lost faith. He had lost faith all right, faith in men, and faith in God. Man did nothing, and if God existed then He was absent and uncaring. He saw little use for that kind of God.

Terry, too, had lost faith along with him. But then Terry had hardened, had gone bitter inside his shell of callous cynicism. although by some amazing will-power still refusing to join the racketeers and self-preservers. His hatred of them was strong, overt and fierce. He himself was hated in return. Most people detested Terry and felt inferior in his presence. He, as he thought, realised that he was far from Terry. Terry without faith and without God was more frightening than any Pharisee. He was a high priest of cynicism and holy scorn.

He dropped his head to conceal his thoughts. The conclusion had come and it frightened him deeply. His conclusion was plain: *in all the universe there was no true law.* What others had been doing was neither wrong nor right since there was no law. Where there is no God there is no law. Where laws exist they are made by men. Out of their religions no doubt, or out of their politics, but in fact no law is valid for man is not an eternal creature. The conscience has lied about that future and about that judgement. *There is no judgement.*

He felt his hands as they lay on his lap, one in the other. If there was no law then all was finished for him. Cruelty, selfishness. crime—these were all man-made terms intended

to discourage the murderers, the rapists, the thieves, the oppressors. They were inventions of the human mind, and cunning inventions at that. If there was no law, no *true law*, then justice was a man-made thing.

His mind reluctantly came to the obvious conclusion— anything goes! Anything! His mind reeled at that. He could lie, deceive, cheat, murder—anything—and it did not matter! Man—out of his self-protective laws—might seek to punish, but then that did not matter, not essentially.

He looked at the rice cakes on the plate. Every meal-time for months he had gone through the same struggle. Christ had said, 'Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friend.' Each meal he had sought to do this. He had taken the smallest rice cake so that others would have more. His stomach cried out for the largest. His conscience approved when he took the smallest. Taking a small rice cake was more than merely symbolic of love. It was love in action, for the whole body yearned for the larger cake.

Terry had always taken the smallest cake. This was what worried him. Terry was contemptuous, cynical, giving the impression that there was no love, only a worship of the ethical will which bordered on the demonic. He would rather have seen Terry reduced to babbling hunger and human error than to have him in his deified state.

For himself the end had come. His own moral assets had nigh on given out. He knew all the more. Take the largest cake and you were avowedly selfish. You gained life—in principle—by pushing others towards death. To take the smallest because you feared others, or sought approval, was also a form of self-preservation. You coveted their acceptance.

This then was the end. He would take the largest. He would be honest in his self-preservation. He would declare it clearly. Terry would despise him, but then Terry had law

without God, ethics without love. He was intensely himself as against all mankind. He was alone, cruel god on his own.

So he looked at the cakes. A faint doubt was still there —the doubt cast by the Nazarene. Was he what he claimed to be—Son of God? Did God exist? Last Sunday he had listened to the hymn in the chapel:

‘Oh, Sabbath rest by Galilee.
Oh, calm of hills above
Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee
The silence of eternity
Interpreted by love.’

Had this man indeed lived in an Eastern country—Palestine—and had he had humans as disciples, and had he interpreted the seeming silence of God by his physical actions? He doubted it, but the faint thought lingered.

What he knew beyond all possible doubt was that the last of his moral resources was expended. Nothing remained to give him power to take the smallest cake. If there were no law because no God then anything was permissible. If even there were a God, and a law, he was far beyond obeying it. All moral powers were exhausted.

Anarchy lay ahead. He knew that. Beastliness was permissible, admissible without prejudice. What he had always seen as wrong would now be neither right nor wrong but just how things would be. So he would take the largest rissole.

The thought had been gradually invading his mind. ‘If God exists, and His law is true, then man is eternal; the conscience is his assurance of life beyond. Everything in life then would matter. God would be good: evil, evil. Judgement would be true, justice vindicated, righteousness proved.’

His mind muttered. ‘if God exists—if, if, if...’

He decided his course of action: if God exists He must help me. He must prove He is God and I am a man by giving me a new moral power—but a new power of love—to take

the smallest cake. This must not be for self-elevation, or out of the desire for man’s approval or because I fear man’s disapproval, but because by doing so I will truly love, for love lays down its life for its friend.

Knowing his utter weakness, his moral exhaustion, his bankruptcy of love, he said, ‘Oh God! If You exist—if You are God and law is truly law, love is truly love—then give me the power to take the smallest out of pure truth. I know truth is love.’

He sensed the miracle. His mind was suddenly clear. His heart was quietly peaceful. His body ceased to cry for its rights. He watched, with some amazement, the hand which was his own, stretching out to take the smallest cake.

No one else sensed the miracle. Terry, aloof, did not see it. The others, intent on the selection of the best, saw him take the smallest, but then they knew he always did that. For him it was the greatest matter of all his life.

God, law and love, in one beautiful trinity, were suddenly true and the way things really are.

As for him, he could not describe the nature and the power of this new pure peace spreading through him.

LOVE IS FOR OTHERS

First there was the Word.
 The Word was Love. The Word
 Was from Love. From the Word
 Love's creation ensued. All is love.
 This straight truism is the truth
 That lies behind the Truth.

When the Word brought forth man—
 Palpable love in the personalised way—
 Then this was creation's true hope:
 Its goal in fact, God's quiet intention
 For the living revelation of Himself.
 Not as man thinks, some brilliant blazing glory,
 Some incandescent irradiation
 But the steady manifestation
 Of perpetual love in unceasing self-giving.

Give but the hint that this is the way.
 The true mode of man, the only expression
 Of love's innate being, and the reaction will come:
 The angry response to the insistence
 That God is love, man the living reflection
 And this in self-giving, in regard for others,
 Regard for the needy, always serving the neighbour,
 Serving also the enemy as the friend.
 Then the scandal will appear as its—love's—scandal.

Why then the scandal, the great offence?
 How is this the word that man abhors?
 The answer must be, 'Guilt arises

With the calm insistence upon the warm natural duty
 Of Word—and—Love—created man. Now, to sinful man,
 Self-giving, others—regarding is an exceptional event,
 An occasional and spontaneous happening,
 But not—let it be known—habitual.

Not the essential manner of life, the norm,
 The unchanging and innate mores
 Of the entire human race.'

This, then, is the lie, the lie unmasked
 In the Incarnation. Prior to that event
 He was prepared to give, self—give,
 Not to retain, to husband himself and resources.
 He empties himself (though not *of himself*),
 That is of his rights of deity to glory,
 His right to non—participation in the human event.
 His was participation and—as we may say—
 Up to the hilt.

Those—the few with simple insight—see it clearly.
 Theirs is the sight of faith, not sight of sight.
 Men misjudged him, insinuating motives,
 Imputing the modes of thought consistent with their own,
 'Devil and winebibber, crazy messiah,
 Megalomaniac, demagogue and aspirant
 To the ultimate power.' They did not see
 All that he did was to give (not take)
 And serve the everlasting neighbour.

Not only in the dark hard hours of Gethsemane,
 Not simply in the night of judgement
 And in the day of the Cross, the coldness of the tomb,
 But formerly—in those Palestinian days—
 In the constant rejection, the unchanging
 Misunderstanding, the false accusations

And the lies. His heart cried. 'Compassion!'
 His chest racked with its passion,
 Rent with its sobs for the blind humanity
 The unresponsive Jerusalem
 Dry as a twig, as a cursed fig tree,
 Ready for the horrific burning.

What matter! There was no despair,
 No frenetic anger or inner fear.
 Nor—for that matter—shrugged resignation,
 Tired bitterness or cynical gesture
 Of disillusioned unrequited love.
 He gave unchangingly, unremittingly,
 Gladly, with willingness, and calm
 In his gentle and immutable love.
 Giving, he counted all no cost.
 Nor thought upon the thing that he had done.
 Love in its true ultimate lives unaware—
 Will locked to thought as thought to will—
 Doing in spontaneity the will of will,
 Willing in guileless graciousness.

Now is the day of gracious imitation—
 Though not of mimic, mindless reflection—
 Of the Christ events. Love lives within,
 Not as the received abstraction. the lofty concept.
 But as the Person. Faith and the Spirit
 Make it to be thus. He dwells. The life
 Becomes one with its simple host.
 The true imitation is the becoming one
 With the power of his habitation.

Love, then, is service to neighbour.
 Though not detached and objective giving,
 Not in the calculated assessing of the need

(With its fulfilment thereof). Love regards
 With natural sincerity, the pure regard
 Of the needy neighbour and the creation.
 This is the steady stance of love
 Revealed by the Son—become—man.

Sons, then, are the lovers, the true ones:
 Life being in the sharing with the neighbour
 By bringing to him the true eternal treasure
 As also the needed crust, the warm touch,
 The uplifting gaze. the encouragement,
 The earnest insistence of the given nobility
 And of the love—engifted worth,
 The grace of the creation. Creation's gift
 Being one's true being, the gift of God.

Sometimes in the exigencies of life
 The true test comes—the ultimate giving,
 Not for giving's or receiving's sake,
 But for love. No greater love has man than this—
 To give himself in death for others.
 Not to them so that he may draw from them,
 But for them so that they in turn may live.
 Thus in its peak love gives itself,
 Counting its life not first, but love,
 Love in its finest hour,
 Love in its true and gracious garb.

FROM SHAME TO SERENITY

It seems that all night the Man had been on the Mount of Olives. Time and again he went into a place of retreat. Prayer and meditation with him were not a ritual but a necessity. Refurbishing the spirit was an endless requirement. The gracious anointing of the Spirit at his baptism had been followed by innumerable renewals. There is no comment about this particular time on the Mount of Olives, but it is certain the quietness renewed him. It was also a time of preparation.

Early in the morning he came to the temple. For some, six o'clock was the hour of prayer. Perhaps in this dawn-time he was coming for a special contingency. He was welcomed by the people. He sat down as they seated themselves around him, and he taught. It was pure nature for him to teach. He had gathered so simply and wonderfully the wisdom of God. As a child he had gone to the matter directly and simply, and the doctors of those days had wondered at him. *Marvelled* is perhaps a better word.

Truth when it is unveiled without complication is so obvious and so simple. It is clear, direct, unassailable and wholly acceptable. So, as the day began to grow, he taught them.

Perhaps up on Olivet he had been told of a happening which was to occur that day. Here, now, it seemed to be beginning. A group of scribes and Pharisees approached him. These unbending men of the law were set upon some course of their own. They moved towards him with unmistakable intention. Their eyes were fixed upon him as he taught. They knew this Jesus had not been trained in their

scholastic methods, in their way of argument and dialogue. His methods, to their way of thinking, were 'way out', unpolished, uncultured.

Nevertheless in his simplicity of life, teaching and action he presented a deep problem to them. The ordinary people —the untutored and the ignorant—listened to him as though he were really the Messiah he claimed to be. They gathered about him eagerly, soaking up what he said, and being indoctrinated by his unusual statements and his unorthodox views. The pity was that he also effected apparent healings and bizarre exorcisms. On those grounds they were rendered powerless.

There were other grounds which they could work, more familiar to them, and in the area of the law. On this law they were experts, couched from their childhood. They had grown up in that pietistic sect known for venerating it—the sect of the Pharisees. They were proud of the law of Moses and could boast meticulous adherence to it as well as knowledge of its minutiae.

The case they had in hand was a safe one. It was that of adultery. The law said that a person taken in adultery must be stoned. Leviticus 20:10 had said, 'If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.' A different case is cited in Deuteronomy 22:13–21 when an avowed virgin is discovered at marriage to have infringed her virginity. Proven to be an adulteress or a fornicator the woman is to be stoned.

The group of law-upholders approached the company about Jesus' feet. Perhaps they looked with scorn upon the class which the man Jesus was teaching. They had high matters to discuss and so they led a woman into the midst of the group. This had nothing to do with the case cited in Deuteronomy 22. This woman's case was that of a person caught in the act of adultery, a notion quite difficult to

entertain without wonder and embarrassment.

Yet the law stood. It had been formulated for such cases. Presumably its idea was not simply academic: it was meant for practical application.

They posed the situation to him, no doubt gravely referring to his great didactic wisdom. Teacher he had claimed to be, and so teacher they also would make him.

'Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now, in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?'

The Teacher it seemed was left with only two alternatives: either to agree with Moses and have her stoned, or to disagree with Moses and be disloyal to the law.

However the case might appear, to a trained lawyer it had side issues which do not appear directly in the script. For one thing there is little evidence and even less probability that this particular law had been used in many a long year. A sanction it was, and as such as valuable for society as many other such sanctions. For centuries Islam has held similar sanctions without practically following them. In times of intense religious revival these laws may be freshly and actively imposed. For the most, like this Judaic law, they lie in desuetude. They were virtually asking Jesus to revive an ancient law which was on the statutes but in disuse.

Secondly, they had made a major error, to which Jesus would not even refer. They had brought only one partner. *Where was the man?* Moses had commanded that both be put to death. Why, indeed, had they not brought the man? Was this part of contemporary sexism, or was it in fact impossible to bring the man? If they were sincere the scribes and Pharisees would wish to fulfil wholly the sacred law to which they referred!

Could it possibly be that the whole matter had been rigged? Was it a case of complicity—the male collaborating

with these law-men to catch Jesus and discredit him in the eyes of the public? Would there, in fact, have been no case had he not plotted with them to bring about the disgrace—even death—of the woman, as also the demise of Jesus as a leader and teacher? We cannot be dogmatic, but the absence of the male offender raises principal questions.

If Jesus sensed or knew these things he did not mention them. His teaching had been interrupted by something which appeared serious but which, in fact, was in bad taste, and in the ultimate, frivolous. A woman had been placed in the midst who—given her serious sin—was being subjected to unusual ignominy.

To their question Jesus gave no answer—instead he stopped and wrote with his finger in the dust. Posterity has been curious as to what he wrote and conjectures are many and varied. However, what he wrote was evidently not intended for posterity to read and know.

'Perhaps,' one has suggested, 'he simply doodled!'

It does not matter. It passed the moment. The wisest of men, the Gospels indicate, rarely just answered the questions put to him. Generally he responded by asking further questions. Often these queries withered those of his opponents and they retired ashamed.

On this occasion he simply gave them time to think. Had they done so they might have discovered wisdom, but they persisted. We are told they went on asking him questions. Were they uneasy? Did they think they had him in a tight corner? Were they pressing their advantage?

They then received their answer. 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her.'

Some might think this brilliant. It is universally known that none is without sin. How clever they so to speak, to hoist them on their own petard! It was more than that. Wise interpreters have sensed that Jesus phrased it even more particularly: 'Let him who is without *this kind of sin* cast the

first stone.'

That is closer. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus had shown that lust in the heart, even without the overt act, is adultery. How many, in all the wide world, are free then of the guilt of adultery? Who is there who has been wise and gifted enough to escape this inner lust?

The account is salutary. 'But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest.'

How effective!

We need to keep in mind a powerful factor which may easily escape the reader's attention, namely the holiness and purity of Jesus. This quality was the background and foil to their own innate impurity. It was not just an utterance of his which had undone them, but an utterance given in simple but dynamic virtue. A peerless conscience had spoken to consciences laden with concealed but obscene works. No wonder they left him, and this with some haste. The impure conscience cannot easily withstand confronting purity. Its brilliance is deadly to the besmirched mind.

Why, then, from the oldest to the youngest? The answer is that the older have more to remember. More has been stored away, and age brings things of the past more acutely to the memory than it does of the present business of life. It is not that the older are more honest, but have more to press them to decision. As we said, his holiness rapidly crystallised memory and emotions. Conscience beat out its sledge-hammer notes of warning and judgement.

It must have been both sad and salutary to see the silent ritual as the accusers filed out, heads bowed with memory and conviction. It was not merely the defeat of a cruel and legalistic ruse. It was the quiet Judgement of a gentle but determined Saviour of the sinful. Who knows what began that early morning in men who came grimly to effect judgement both of all adulterous woman and the Son of God? Perhaps the beginnings of repentance, the stirrings of faith

in the holy teacher, and a new distrust of their own unmasked cruelty.

Some facts are certain. The woman would have been destroyed as a person had they succeeded. Jerusalem would have rung from one end to another with her sin. Her character would have been crushed. She would have been the plaything of gossip. The cruelty would have seared her soul and she would have been branded for life.

Now every lip was sealed. None dared report the story. Not anyway those who had filed out. Even the group he had been teaching had also melted away, and the field was left to the Man and the single sinner now standing by him. He had knelt to write. He had stood up to deal with the accusers, perhaps to confront them with his pure and thoughtful gaze. Now he stooped again. He looked up, enquiry in his fine eyes.

'Woman, where are they? Has no one accused you?' Perhaps she had not realised that it was thus—no one able to accuse her. Perhaps it broke on her then with bewildering revelation.

She said, 'No one, Lord.'

He said. 'Neither do I condemn you. Go, and do not sin again.'

She must have moved as if in a dream, but then a dream different from the nightmare she had just known. It was a dream of joyful reality. Here was one who had power to acquit her.

'No condemnation!' This was the cry in her heart, a cry to be taken up later by a great apostle of the Man. He was to send his cry ringing down through the centuries. 'There is, then, no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus!'

No condemnation. No guilt. Freed from the judgement of the law. Perhaps she did not figure this all out in the theological way. Just as his penetrating words had pierced the hearts of the severe accusers, so now his gentle words had

absolved her from the past.

He knew the only way to bring holiness and obedience is to breed love in the heart by forgiveness and cleansing. To achieve this was to cost him the Cross. Out of the prodigality of that love he bestowed his largesse upon her. *Salvific largesse*, the theologians call it, whilst some use the familiar word *grace*.

But the motivation to holiness. that is the great point here. Is there a severe word of warning? Of course. But then is there a strong word of encouragement? Undoubtedly. He is saying, 'I forbid disobedience. I command obedience. I set you free from paralysing guilt. I cleanse you from deep and destructive defilement. I expect therefore that what I command you will rejoice to obey.'

So it was. That is all we can believe, and not only for her, but for us also.

Those who have gone by the same way know the incredible joy she knew from his liberating love as she set her face to a new loyalty. The bliss of forgiveness is the power for willing obedience. It is the true motive for new holiness.

This is the way of pure love.

THE UNIVERSAL CONSCIENCE

He was a small man, features delicately chiselled. His eyes were dark, like his straggling, shiny hair. But he was restless. He sat askew his chair in the small hospital chapel. You might ask why he was there, at this morning service, in this mission hospital. The question would be quite reasonable.

The visiting speaker cocked an eye at the small Thai father. He was a father because he had a child, a small restless son who kept twining about him, jerking away from him, and then darting back, fearful lest he lose his father. The man had a deep emotional affection for his little boy. In fact he seemed almost dependent upon him, as though he needed his affection. He was even fierce in his possessiveness. Indeed both were that way.

The speaker knew something concerning the little man. He knew that three nights previously this Thai had come to the hospital, belligerent and abusive. He had mouthed streams of venom, directing his hatred at the quiet, trim, Thai nurses. They were shocked at his behaviour and reported him. The superintendent had remonstrated, but the little man was passionate. Finally they called the police. The police had taken him away, the little boy clinging to his father, refusing to be parted. The man's in-laws had taken his other three children. That much the father knew.

The meeting began. Music with Western origin, but oriental in utterance. The liquid Thai language breaking through gently. The high singing voices of the dainty little nurses. Then the quiet murmur of a prayer, the level reading of the Scripture, and finally the speaker standing, looking at his audience whose language he did not know. In his mind the

familiar sense of inability, almost to the point of frustration. How does one communicate to a people of another culture, a different language, other thought patterns? Then the age-old answer: 'Speak to the heart. That is the one constant for all men, everywhere.' The echo of a familiar Scripture: 'He hath made of one [man] all men for to dwell upon the face of the earth.' One common origin. One heart-beat. Language and culture has not altered this.

The little man was not looking directly at the speaker. He wriggled restlessly as the first words came through, slowly, by translation. Yet he comprehended. He was both desiring and fighting against understanding. Sometimes the words came with a stab, and he winced. Finally he pulled out some white paper such as butchers use for wrapping meat. He spilled some dark, venomous-looking tobacco on to his palm. Deliberately he rolled his cigarette. Then he lit it. Mild horror in the eyes of the otherwise passive nurses, as the blue smoke spiralled. The speaker watched the disdain in their faces, as their dainty noses wrinkled in disgust. Yet they were attentive to the speaker, just as the little man.

He was listening. His son twined about his legs, whilst he blew his smoke fiercely and obtrusively upwards, yet he listened. His listening seemed like a form of torture. But he listened. He was even quiet when the speaker suddenly began to describe the Cross of the man Jesus. He followed, fascinated, until the last word. Then he grunted as the closing prayer began, and he shifted about during the singing of the final hymn. He began to dart off as the benediction was pronounced.

The speaker missed little. If the language was not his, he knew another language, the universal language of the conscience. He said to a missionary nursing sister. 'Tell that man I would like to speak to him.'

The man caught the nuance of the voice, and he hooked uneasy. The sister was too quick for him. 'He wants to speak to you,' she said. The Thai father was silent, staring down at the concrete floor.

'Read to him,' said the speaker. 'Read Psalm thirty-two, the first two verses.'

The missionary read them, gently. 'Listen,' she said. 'Listen to this.' The words rolled out to the little man:

'Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man to whom the Lord
imputes no iniquity.
and in whose spirit there is no deceit,'

The little father was quiet for a moment, tensed. Then a stream of words rolled from his mouth.

Even the visitor could catch the tone. They were like a pitiful cry. 'Stop him,' he said, 'and ask him whether he has any sin in his heart which he has not confessed?'

Sin? How can you use that old Judaic word, that Christian word, that much-used word of the West, in a soft oriental culture, with its Buddhist overburden? A word like that must surely be out of place. Yet the Thai responded. 'Tell the man,' he said, 'that I have an unconfessed sin, the sin of not believing on Jesus.'

The speaker was the surprised one. He was remembering the night of the Last Supper, and Jesus saying to his bewildered disciples, 'When the Spirit of truth is come, he will convince the world of sin...because they believe not on me.' Here, two millenniums later, and in the up-country areas of Central Thailand, the Spirit was speaking to a man who had been reared in a Buddhist culture: 'Believe on me, Jesus.'

'Well,' the speaker said gently to the nurse, 'read the next two verses of the psalm.'

The sister read them, slowly:

'When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me:
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.'

The sister was astonished. 'Why,' she said, breathing hard with excitement, 'when I read the first two verses, and he talked, he said words which are almost identical with these.' She looked at the speaker. 'How come,' she asked, 'that this could happen? He's never read this psalm, so far as I know.' She checked with the small Thai. He shook his head. He had never read it.

The preacher looked at the sister. 'There was a great theologian,' he said, 'who once wrote, "Conscience is the most universal thing of all." You know, suppressed guilt acts just in the way the psalm describes. It acts like that in every culture. You can't hide your guilt and not feel it. The very bones and body of a man ache with it.'

Then the speaker and sister looked at the man. He stared back. Suddenly he understood that the foreigner knew all about it, all about the universal problem of man. He wasn't restless any more. There was someone, in this wide world, who understood. An eagerness came into his eyes, a look of deep interest. With it was evident hope.

The sister was speaking in English to the visitor. 'Nine months ago,' she said, 'he asked to do a correspondence course, and we sent it to him. In one of the lessons he acknowledged that Jesus was Lord, and God the true God. He read his Bible. He was, in a sense, a new Christian; but something happened. We don't even know what it was. All of a sudden he was here, cursing and denying Jesus and the Christian faith.'

'It happens everywhere,' said the speaker. 'There is always a reason.' There was tenderness in his eyes when he looked at the Thai father. 'There is forgiveness,' he said, through the translator. 'You can be forgiven for not believ—

ing on Jesus. That helps you to really believe on him.' He paused, and then said quietly. 'Every sin a man has ever committed has been taken into that Cross, and destroyed.'

It was not unbelief in the eyes of the man—only high astonishment. He said nothing, just looking at this foreigner who said amazing things in a simple way. He had moved out to the red earth beyond the hospital chapel, and his big right toe began to make a pattern in the firm soil.

'Forgiveness is for all,' the preacher continued. 'God knows the need of all men.'

The hospital evangelist had come to take the speaker to visit some of the homes away from the hospital in the nearby pardi fields, and in the strips of the jungle. The small party of the sister, the evangelist, and the speaker began to move towards the administration block. The father and his small boy followed them, drifting behind. The small man was determined not to lose contact with this stranger.

Past the administration block they went, the sister leaving them. They went on, across the ploughed road of clay mud, down the rutted track, until they were walking silently through the pardi fields where the rice was green and still in the hot day.

Dogs snarled as they approached a village, but the evangelist pointed a restraining finger and they dropped into silence. The two men went on, eager to share the gospel which is for all men.

Behind them, refusing to be lost, insistent on hearing more, followed the diminutive Thai father with his little boy. He had plenty of time—there everyone has plenty of time—and he purposed to know what his heart was already telling him was true.

So he kept following.

BLIND IS FOR GLORY

I was a blind man, sitting begging. You could not possibly know what that means. The only way you could know would be to be a beggar yourself. Who would want to be that? No one, if he could help it. Such a one hates the degradation of his humanity in what he is doing.

Perhaps you do not know that in my country begging is a form of profession. You may not know that the parents select a child for the role. They see his deformity, and they say to themselves, 'Our poor child! He will be looked down upon with contempt and distaste, and folk will not respect him when he is grown to maturity. His defect will prevent him from having employment. What then will he do? What shall we do, now, to help him, then?'

They decide that the only way is to make capital out of the defect. Healthy people will see his defect, and perhaps pity him. In their health they will pity his deficiency. In fact they may even feel guilty, at times, that they are so healthy, and they will give a guilt-offering in the form of alms. The sense of relief they derive from doing this will make them feel good. In a way they will be glad there was a beggar to whom they could give things.

I tell you, I have worked this out. Not, mind you, that I could see that look of relief. When you are blind you can see nothing. However, you can feel things—sometimes better than a person with sight can see them. So I know that in a strange way my being a beggar has helped people. It's a shame, though, that they need this kind of help. They should simply be grateful for health and sight, and they ought never to feel guilty about it.

Now, to get to my problem: I was born blind.

We have a saying in my culture: 'From the womb!' It is even stronger than the saying, 'From birth,' or 'Born blind.' It means, 'In the mystery of the womb, first in the conception, and then in the pregnancy, strange events happen.' Since all people sin, and my father and mother are themselves people, then did they do something so terrible that God decided to give them a child who was blind? Was this to remind them of their sin, and bring a strong element of suffering and so of punishment into their experience? Was God revealing Himself to them in this way? Had they in their foolishness thought they could get away with their sin? Had God come to remind them in quiet but timely manner?

These thoughts, and a thousand like them, have been in my mind as I have begged.

Did I not, then, know my parents? I had always thought I knew them. Did I, somehow, see them as the cause of my suffering? I know they made me a beggar, not out of cruelty, but out of a desire to provide for me. They worked out what would be best for me. You might as well know that many of us beggars often earn more than a hard-working labourer. That is how things are. So I have never been angry about their planning my vocation. Given the right philosophic slant to life, you can be a beggar and yet enjoy life.

I have to be honest, though: I have not much enjoyed it. I have had these two questions running in my mind since I can remember.

The first is, 'Did my parents sin, and am I blind because they did?' That poses many problems for me, and gives me a view of the Creator which I would prefer not to have.

The second question is even more terrible. 'Have I myself sinned so that I am now blind?' You know that I have been blind from the womb, before I could make conscious decisions. One of our books has a saying, 'The wicked go astray from the womb'. This must mean that a child sets his attitude

at least at birth, if not before. I tell you, that thought terrifies me. It speaks of a greater mystery of God than I can comprehend. For this reason I will enlarge upon it.

I have heard of the man John the Baptist. He was, they tell me, the son of a priest, but his conception was set within a mystery. Zechariah his father and Elizabeth his mother were both beyond the normal age for bearing children. It is said that an angel told Zechariah that he would have a son, and this Zechariah was not prepared to accept, not even from an angel. For his lack of faith he was struck dumb for a certain period. However, what is the mystery in the story is that Elizabeth had a cousin who was also visited by an angel. This angel told the cousin, Mary, that she would conceive without knowing a man. Mary went to talk matters over with her cousin Elizabeth, and when they met, the baby John actually leaped within his mother's womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and it is claimed that John was also filled with the Holy Spirit.

This strange story is the one I have pondered deeply. What I derive from it is this: in some strange and inexplicable way, a child may make decisions within the womb. One of our books says that God knows the child within the womb. Does, then, the child also know God? Does he respond to God? Is it possible he even reacts to this One who knows him? Have I, even so early, sinned against God in thought, and is my blindness the result of my own sin?

In our history we have had two great prophets who have uttered the same thought. They claimed they had it from God. God told them that my people were using a proverb which was false. The proverb used to go something like this: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.'

Long ago God had told us that He would visit the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of them that hated Him. On the other hand, He

show mercy unto thousands of generations of them that loved Him. My ancestors often took this statement to excuse their sins. They said God was visiting them with sins because of what their fathers had done. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel claimed that God wished to counteract a false interpretation of what He had said.

What He had said was in regard to continued and deliberate idolatry. You may know that idols constitute a frozen or dead image of the thing they portray. Now the last thing that can be said about God is that He is frozen or dead. To the contrary: He is always acting. He is always doing things, and those things are good things. Hence God said that if one generation after another persisted in this foolish and dangerous practice He would not fail to heap the sins of the whole family together so that they all—parents and children—bore them together. Where, however, a family turned to love God, this would not happen.

So much for the explanation. It seemed to me, often, as I pondered the two prophets, that they were saying to me. 'Your blindness must be because your parents and you are of the one piece. Your attitude to God is wrong. Hence you are blind.' I tell you, that is a terrifying thought. It is all the more terrifying because you cannot remember when you had such an attitude: it must have been in the womb.

Before I tell you of the strange events of one glorious day in my life, I must further explain the life of a beggar. This I cannot do unless I give you a modest slice of theology. It will not be so much as to bore you, but even in its smallness it may make you think.

Man, in our culture, was made to be in the image of God. As God is active, so is man. He reflects the greatness of God and is a noble creature. Sadly enough, his sin of rebellion and desired independence of his Creator—God brought him

to a sorry pass. You will have seen sinners, and know their guilt gives them a hang-dog appearance from time to time. If you see it, then—even more—I feel it. Man hates his sense of failure and his feeling of inferiority.

Begging is not man's true vocation. His God gives him all he needs, but he forgets God is the Giver, and he seeks to go about getting his own things in his own ways. He likes to remain independent of God. I can tell you from experience that begging is debasing. It is a form of grovelling before other men, and I have been taught that we should not do that. Even God does not even wish us to grovel before Him. He may wish us to worship Him, but if we do that then we must do it nobly. This befits the one made in the image of his Creator. Do you understand then, what I mean? If you do then you will understand the terrible sense of debasement that a beggar must experience. All of this I loathed. Sometimes, looking back, I wonder how it could ever have been.

I have already told you the problems I had, puzzling about God and sin—mine and my parents'. There was one other explanation for my blindness that I could think of. But it terrified me even more. It meant that if neither my parents nor I were sinners in that sense, then God either did not care, or He was not truly in control of His universe. That would leave only a blind, unreasoning or cruel, relentless fate. It meant that for man—or at least for me, the blind beggar man—there was no true destiny! Such a conclusion makes this world to be a frightening place. You could never be sure of the powers, as to who or what they are, and as to what they may do. I think, of all. I preferred the punishing God to unpredictable fate.

Now I come to these strange and glorious events of one day which changed my life.

On that wonderful day I was, as usual, begging. A beggar

always lives in the hope that he will have a man come along who gives with extraordinary generosity. Indeed he may also hope a man with heavy guilt may come along and seek to expiate his sins by giving a gift of unusual proportions. So even I had my expectant moments, and they compensated, temporarily, for the debasement of my profession. In this sense you live in a sort of hope as you beg.

I had heard of the man called Jesus. In fact I had heard many debates concerning him. Some thought him a good man, and others felt he was a blasphemer. I must admit that my theology was very small. I had enough to worry about, trying to work out my own situation. I was interested nevertheless when I heard him and his disciples approaching.

Whatever I was to the Master, I was nothing to the disciples. Perhaps because their bent was religion, they were discussing my case. I could have been quite angry about that, but after a time you get to accepting the fact that people see you not as a man, but simply as one who is blind. Everything else about you is healthy. All your limbs are in good order. Your ears hear well, your nose breathes, and you eat and speak with your mouth. You feel with your hands. You know you are a man, but all they perceive of your manhood is blindness. They do not see that it is one defect in an otherwise complete person.

As I have said, I had become accustomed to this kind of talk. The most I could hope from it was that it would stir enough pity—or guilt—to stimulate to the giving of alms. In this case it did not.

This was their question: 'Master! Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' I recognised the age-old orthodoxy of their religious reasoning, having puzzled over the same question myself. However, the answer I heard was one I never anticipated. It stunned me. Even now I can remember the thrill which went through me. It was joy and fear compounded. His statement was. 'It was not this man

who sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be manifest in him.' Can you imagine what that meant to me? It was telling me that my age-old problem did not even exist. My parents had not sinned! I had not sinned! There was no mysterious happening within the womb which began at my will and made its terrible mark upon my body. I was free of all that accusation. I was without that kind of condemnation. No wonder I overflowed with joy.

Then, as though that were not enough, this man was telling me in the very voice of God that my life was one of incredible purpose. Nothing of all these years I had lived was wasted. In the womb, even, God had planned His works. My blindness was no accident which He purposed to use: it was so that He might show Himself in His greatness. Hence neither my blindness, nor my beggary—not even the smallest detail of my life—had ever been without point! It was all to some great purpose. I tell you it was a flooding of light into me that cannot be described. I felt the enormous joy and wonder of it break into me. Whether you know it or not I will tell you: a man only really lives when he knows he is in this world for purpose, and he lives most fully when he knows the purpose is God's. It a man feels his life is pointless, he is like a rudderless ship. To save his sanity he must seek to carve out a purpose, and then he must try to imitate some seal of divinity to stamp upon it. What I tell is true, for I knew so much inanity in those seemingly aimless years. That was the thing which put the whine into my beggar's voice.

This Jesus, when he said the words I have recorded, also said, in the same breath, 'We must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day. Night comes when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' I think I knew what he meant more than did his disciples. When he said, 'We must work the works of him that sent me,' he meant that God's intention was now to be

fulfilled in my life, and through my life. This principle must have also fitted every other thing he did. When he included his disciples he meant that he did not work alone. On the one hand he worked with his Father, God. On the other, he worked with his disciples. Men must do what God intends.

I felt the excitement, and the holy dread, as he approached me. I could not see him but some strange thing was happening. The very vibrations of him were reaching me, so to speak. I could not see, but I could sense things. I heard him spit upon the soil, and I heard him rubbing the soil, kneading it with his fingers. I was told the details later, so I tell them as though I saw them with opened eyes. I knew that kneading anything was forbidden on the Sabbath, and of course this was the Sabbath. Yet he did not pause.

If you would know why he mixed spittle and dirt together, then I tell you that it was a sign of my paternity and yours. Out of dust we came, and to dust we go. That is the belief of our culture. Man in the ultimate, of himself, is but dust. That is not demeaning, but wonderful: that God can create warm, living, palpable, sentient man with his humours, his brilliant mind, and his wonderful affections, is the greatest of creational miracles. Jesus was reminding me and others of the powers of God, and what He does with dust and spittle. I felt the moist, half-cool clay upon my eyes, and the strong yet gentle pressure of his fingers upon me. I tell you a man who feels these has felt all a man need ever feel.

When he told me to go to the Pool of Siloam, the pool called 'Sent', I did not understand its symbolism. Later I learned the whole story, that he was the one sent by his Father to where men are, where they lack light, and where they are blind. I went and washed, and the miracle happened. I almost went hysterical with joy and wonder. Light poured into me. Always my body had seemed filled with darkness, a planned void of blackness, but now every part of me was filled with this strange and beautiful light. I came

back, leaping within me, wanting to shout until only a scream could reach and display the heights of my joy. I did not scream but simply came running, because of the wonder of light. I thought back to his words, ‘As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world’. This was simply and beautifully true. He had brought light to me, and that light was shining about us all as the truth of God.

If you ask me what I mean by this, then I answer, ‘All was darkness to me before. There was aimlessness, purposelessness, degradation, humiliation, and terror at the idea of someone’s sin. Now everything was God. Now I knew He loved me, and I knew this man He had sent was flooding me with release, relief, purpose, and healing. That was the light which came to me.’

I expected that one or two, discovering what had happened, would go mad with excitement and praise, and that they would cry, ‘God is in the midst of us!’ I thought others would catch the infection and go running, here and there, throughout Jerusalem. I thought they would tell the huge wonder of what had happened, and that people would fall, weeping, on their knees, and praise the God of light. This they did not do. You must believe when I tell you what occurred then.

Some saw me, but did not speak to me. They asked questions of one another, and not of me. One said, ‘Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?’ There were those who answered. ‘Yes, this is the man.’ Then instead of going into rapturous praise of our God, they debated further. To tell the truth, the change in me must have been remarkable because some denied it could have been me. I suppose it was because I was vibrant with new life. My eyes shone, my body was eager with excitement and love and gratitude. My face had changed. Instead of sightless eyes, my whole being

looked out to where men were. I was greedily snatching up great views of creation. I was looking about at the buildings, the people, the sights which were new to me. Before I had only formed images of these things in my mind, and the sight of them was startling.

Finally they came to me and enquired if it were so: was I the man who had once begged? I told them triumphantly, ‘Yes. I am.’ They asked how it happened and I gave them the details. Some shook their heads with disbelief, but many believed me. They asked me where the man who had given me sight was, but I did not know. In the rush of the new moments of life and joy he had gone. Believe it or not, their faces became quite serious. In fact some of them seemed alarmed. I did not understand immediately, but have since come to realise that they were gravely concerned at what had happened. Their world-view, their life-view, and their religion did not allow for such strange happenings. I think they were alarmed that God might have invaded their safe and ordered human scene, and to them this was disturbing. They were greatly perturbed.

What I tell you now is sad. You see, I had thought that this rabbi, by what he had said, was liberating me into a new life. In one sense, of course, that was true, but in another he had loosed me from my affliction into a world of anger. The men who talked to me about the miracle of sight brought me to a group of Pharisees. You may know that men of this sect are most orthodox and are highly feared by some, as also they are reverenced by others. They asked me what had happened and I told them plainly. My direct answer caused confusion, and then division.

The first objection was that the day was the Sabbath. In doing what he had done the man Jesus had not observed the Sabbath. They said that because of this, he could not be

from God. That of course meant that nay experience was not a true one. It must have come from some other source than God. Had I for one moment believed them, then I would have hated this glorious light which was now mine—light that was within me, as well as all around me. I refused, of course, to do this. I was glad when some said—from amongst the Pharisees—‘How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?’

The mention of the word ‘sign’ greatly relieved me. I knew then that what had happened to me was not only an act and fact within the realm of time, but also that it pointed beyond me, and even beyond this man Jesus, to a Kingdom which transcended the kingdom of man, and even of man and his religion. This thought came to me as they were arguing the matter fiercely. Finally they all turned to me and said, ‘What do you say about this man, seeing he is the one who opened your eyes?’

When they said that, I knew in a flash that the man was a prophet. I cannot pause here to tell you how we understand prophets in our culture, but simply to say that such are the greatest men of God known to us. In past times men such as Elisha and Elijah had even raised people from the dead, and had done other remarkable things. I was coming, of course, to see that he was even more than a prophet, but the light I was seeing had yet more to show me. I said to them, ‘He is a prophet!’

I saw the looks in their eyes. If Jesus were a prophet, and he had broken the Sabbath, then they were faced with terrible questions. It meant their understanding of the Sabbath was at least partly wrong. It also meant they must subject themselves to this special servant of God; that they must hear him. I could see they had to reject even the miracle that had happened or they would have had to believe me. I discovered later that they had made it clear that no one was to believe in this Jesus, and should one do so there would be

punishment meted out. You will not find that easy to accept. I found it unbelievable. You will understand that I was deeply saddened.

It seemed strange to me that they should talk to my parents—as though I were not a responsible man. Perhaps they did this to make sure I was the man who had been blind. My parents, who should have been able to express their rapturous joy, had instead to defend themselves for being my parents, so to speak. In fact, they were most bewildered. Previously I had been a misfortune to them. I had been a deficient and afflicted child. That had been hard and difficult for them. They had to bear the theological reproaches linked with my defect. Now, it seemed, they were great sinners for being my father and mother. You cannot blame them, then, for hedging, for hedge they did. They knew that if they talked about the evident miracle, then they would come under the anger of the Jews, and would be excommunicated from their local synagogue.

Had you lived in my culture you would know that excommunication was really being rejected by the whole community. In fact it was to make you without a community, a terrible thing for us for whom the community encompassed our entire life. Nothing was harder on us than excommunication. This was reserved for the quisling tax-gatherers, and the repulsive prostitutes who would have defiled our cultural purity. Such people were forbidden the cleansing sacrifices.

Having failed with my parents, they came to me again. I guess they thought I would be no match for them, and to tell the truth I did not seek to be. If I sought refuge then it was in the truth. They had come far enough to know they could not deny that a great miracle had been done. Doubtless they had to rationalise this for their own consciences, and so they said, ‘Well, something surely has happened. Your parents

say you are their son, and until today you were blind. In this case God has done a great thing. He has used even a sinner to work His work. You, therefore, give praise to God. However, recognise that this sabbath-breaking man is a sinner.'

When you have light—especially light you have never had before—you cannot admit part of it is darkness, or that light and darkness are mingled. All know that this is impossible. I said that as for his being a sinner or not I did not know. I did, however, know one thing. I said it plainly: 'Whereas I was blind, now I can see.' Such a statement should have brought sanity to their mixed minds, and wonder to their hearts, but that was not what happened. They asked me again, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' I must tell you now that real anger welled within me. All of this seemed so mean, so puerile, so nitpicking. I said to them, 'I have already told you and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples?'

You may well say that I should have been more diplomatic, but then you do not know what I was up against. I will say it plainly and boldly: I was up against darkness. I knew this, and it was sickening. However, they liked this kind of talk. They could argue with me, a non-theologian and an erstwhile beggar. And argue they did.

Their faces sneered, and their words were burred and rough. 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.'

All the light within me, and all the truth I knew, now possessed me beyond my former insecurity and feelings of inferiority. I was so filled with the wonder of what had happened that I cried, 'Why, this is a marvel! You do not know where he came from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshipper of God and does His will, God listens to him. Never

since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God he could do nothing.'

That was a speech all right. It was packed with the new truth which was surging through me. I could not have put such ideas together previous to this, but the ideas surged out of me, and since it was their own theology at core, they could say nothing. They could only use the speech of the baffled—abuse.

Had I agreed with them I would have lived to have my joy privately. I would have had to pull down a blind over the event, and to remain silent. Had anyone asked me I would have had to look about me furtively before I answered, and even then I would have had to make sure the questioner was not out to betray me. I am not ashamed that I told the truth, and that I let the light flow out from me, emanating to all. For all of this I was excommunicated!

The last part of my story is not just a strong but a sad ending to the events. Rightly understood it is terrifying. You see. Jesus heard of my being cast out of the community of the people of God and he came to me. He asked me directly, 'Do you believe in the Son of man?'

When he asked 'you' I knew he meant in contrast to the Jews who were listening close by. They, of course, did not believe in a Son of man. In fact I did not rightly understand what he meant, but since I knew him to be a man come from God I was anxious to believe in such a one. I was marvelling that my interrogators had not interrogated him. It seemed that the courage they had to confront me did not bear a confrontation with him. Instead they listened to what was going on.

I said to this Jesus, 'Sir, who is this one that I may believe on him?' I knew instinctively that he who spoke the truth

was leading me to more of the truth.

Jesus said to me, 'You have seen this one. It is he who now speaks to you.'

I had told the merciless interrogators that I knew him to be a man from God, and that he was doing the will of God, and that he worshipped God. This was not difficult to know, seeing he had said he was the light of the world whilst he was in it, and that he had been sent by God, and was to work the works of God in me and through me. The whole matter crystallised for me when he said he was the Son of man. I knew enough of our ancient writings to know the Son of man was to one day rule all the nations, and that he was to be an exceptional person in the human scene. I had felt his amazing powers, and had heard of his total submission to God. It was no great leap in the dark for me to believe in him, for I was walking in the flooding light of new faith. So I believed!

Belief must express itself, and it did. I tell you that I fell down before him—this great one of God—and I worshipped him. What matter if they would not let me worship in the community—the temple and the synagogue. My heart burst with the joy of worshipping this great one, this light of the world. He had delivered me, and that was enough for me.

It was then he told the terrible truth. For me it was not terrible, but for those standing by it was. You see, this was the climax of the event, in fact the whole reason for it. It sounded so clear, so obvious, and yet so awesome.

He said. 'For judgement I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.'

Unless you are acquainted with our culture, our idioms and our literature, you will not understand what he meant. He did not mean he came judgementally. In fact I have heard that on another occasion he said he did not come to

judge the world, but indeed to save it. What he meant, our idiom, was this: 'I have come into this world to light to those who need it, and who will receive it. They who were blind shall no longer be blind.' This, I could, of course understand, and I rejoiced in the sheer wonder of it. I was living in the very glory of it.

However, he added other words: 'I have come that those who think they see may in fact become blind. They did not think they were blind but I confirm it that they are blind.'

The Pharisees—at least some of them who had interrogated me—stood near. They had not missed a word. Now they asked him, 'Are we, too blind?' as though Jesus had not been referring directly to them. Of course they knew he meant them.

Jesus said, 'If you were blind you would have no guilt: but now that you say, "We see," your guilt remains.'

That was the terrifying thing. They had cast me out of the community of the people of God. In fact Jesus was saying it was they who did not belong to the true people of God. In one sense they had cast themselves out, but in another he was casting them out.

The meaning of his words, and the whole episode, was then clear to me.

'If a man is in darkness, and knows he is in darkness, and confesses such and wishes to be freed from that darkness and be given sight, then that man has no guilt. He is cleansed and forgiven. It is the man who says. "I have need of this. I am in the light." who is in terrible darkness. He has sealed himself in this darkness. He has not recognised the glory of God. In fact he has rejected it.'

I conclude then that when Jesus came to do the works God who sent him, then he brought me into sight and light. The others he confirmed in their blindness and their darkness because they refused the very light of the world.

THE TRUE LIGHT (JOHN 1:4-5)

Where shall I walk?
Where shall my footsteps tread?
There is no way ahead
That I can plan; nor may I seek
My errant footsteps to retrace.
When then I walk in my desire,
Or plan a path of pleasure for myself,
It ends in pointless nothingness,
Stretching to lonely, dreary moors
And sightless desolation.
Why does He circumscribe
The path I tread? Why does He circumvent
The ways that I would go?
Why does He let me know
That all my trekking empty is
And leads me but to folly,
Being yet pointless passing?

How is it then that pathless ways
Are ways that I do plan,
Whilst His are ways—indeed *the Way*—
That leads alone to Him?
Has not some dreamer in his dreams
Perchanced upon that Way,
Or happened on a hunch to find?
Cannot a man who ventures hard
Discover this Path once planned by God?
Why says He. ‘No!’?

When flamed this silent planet into light.
And all the stars in concert shouted.
For first birth of the universe.
Then shed his light, the Son
His life was light to all—
And into man’s first mind there came
The pristine wisdom, gentle light:
Man knew the truth and knew’ the wan
And revelled in its joy.

How came it then that man refused
The outer truth and inner light,
Choosing the darkness, calling it
‘The light of truth’ as blinded he
Delighted in self-created chimeras
And falsity of fantasy, espoused
The counterfeit reality? How came it then
That mankind sought
Its pleasures in a sensual world,
Enshrining its countless deities
Where One alone is God, Man’s Father true
All guiltless in beneficence
And rich creative glory?

Pity the steps of wayless man.
Of sightless souls that grope their
Apeing the glory once they knew.
And treading in their haughty pride
Their mindless paths to futile ends
And godless goals. Have pity;
Yet in such pity pray for them.
That they may see the Cross complete.
The empty Tomb, the Risen Christ.
The Son Ascended and the Father waiting
There, where pride exhausted men return

Into the arms of Him Who heals
And lights man's path to glory.

This is the Light—the Son—
That lightens men; this was the light that came
Into the darkness of perverted truth,
Reversed the lie, lived out the truth,
Proclaimed it to the babes in mind
And won their hearts. This is the light
That blazed into the terror of the lie
Unmasking it, and setting free
Spirit enchain'd by sin's deceit.
This is the light that floods the way
Where man must tread.

This is the truth that is the Truth,
The true Light widely shining:
This is the Way that leads to Home,
Which quiets all man's restless yearning,
As man himself is born anew
To depthless understanding.

VISION IN THE VALLEY

Some years ago I revisited the Island of Singapore where we had been prisoners-of-war under the Japanese army. Everything, of course, had been changed. I was driven by old friends to the war cemetery at Kranji. The site was beautiful, and the care and concern shown for the memory of the dead was warming. I stood on that hill and looked across the seemingly endless rows of neat crosses, each marking the death of men who had been brave or fearful, foolish or wise, strong or weak in their last hours.

When I searched among the lists of the dead, inscribed in beautiful stone, the tears came afresh for men I had known but of whose end I had not been aware. I will not burden you with the private thoughts I had, or the strange feelings which came to me on that day.

I stood for a while looking down to where our old prison camp had been. Long ago it had been destroyed, its old huts of timber, bamboo plaiting and attap roofing having been demolished. I stood in the soaking sunshine, remembering the day one of our mates had died and I had been given the task of burying him. I was not a chaplain at the time, but for some reason or other I had been selected to say the last rites.

We had wended our way up to this very hill. I had made painful progress in climbing because of a gammy leg and by reason of the general weakness of malnutrition. It had been my first emergence—ever—from the confines of barbedwire and patrolling guards. I had scarcely been able to contain my excitement, as, standing on that hill I had looked across the green Island, and then out to the amethyst waters of the Johore straits.

Again strange memories stirred, of how we had hoped and thought about some future freedom. Again. I do not need to bother you with the details.

The sense of temporary freedom had overridden the sadness of committing our dead mate to the red clay. Afterwards we had filed down the hill, the wistful notes of the 'Last Post' still lingering in our minds. Then we were within the barbed-wire, and prison life had resumed its strange patterns. The journey to that sun-soaked hill was not forgotten. It became a faintly pleasant memory, covered over by the fears and uncertainties of the passing days, and the dreams of eventual release.

It was in that camp that I had met Leon, a quiet English boy who was saved from death by a vision.

In the early days of Changi Prison Camp I had come to know many of the English soldiers, or as they were called, 'British Tommies'. This covered the famous regiments of Scots who had been captured, such as 'The Black Watch', 'The Argyles', and 'The Southern Highlanders'. Notable stories are told of them in action and in prison.

In the Changi days I had not met Leon, but his closest friend was Kerry James. Kerry was always talking about Leon. Kerry himself was still recovering from battle wounds when Leon had been selected for a working party to go to Thailand. At the time the Japanese captors had promised a home from home in the quiet land of the Thais. Life would be close to idyllic—that was the rumour. Food would be good. Work would be minimal.

How eager were the men to be on their way to Thailand! Leon was reluctant to part from Kerry. He had cared for this mate of his with food he had bought or scrounged in the locality. At night he would slip through the lines of barbedwire and risk death to get it.

The parting was not easy. Kerry was still unable to walk but he urged Leon to join the lucky ones. Leon wanted to leave, but hesitated. He finally hurried from the hospital barracks, climbed into a khaki-coloured truck, and was driven with others to the rail-siding. Soon he, with the ragged troupe of Aussies and Tommies, was incarcerated in enclosed cattle-trucks and the whole contingent of men was on its way, doomed to share a horror-trip which would bring death for many of them.

Leon was one of the shattered contingent which returned to Changi. It would take many pages, even volumes. to describe the state of those who came back from the Burma-Thailand railway. 'Every sleeper a death' was the solemn epitaph of that fatal railway construction. Thousands of deaths resulted from sheer hunger and weakness, but the greatest toll came from the dread cholera which swept through until bodies were piled high for grisly cremation. Others died of the vicious tropical ulcers which spread slowly and ruthlessly across debilitated bodies.

It was the lack-lustre looks in their eyes which we found so puzzling and even repugnant. It was as though the spirits of the men had withdrawn, hiding in some last dreary citadel of the person, whilst the eyes, deadened and sunken, stared soullessly at the world they had long ago repudiated. The terrible memories of cruelties, of sudden deaths or of lingering disease, were proving too much for the human spirit to sustain.

I visited old friend after old friend, but whilst their names were pinned to the beds, personal identification in many cases proved impossible. The distinguishing marks which are the birthright of every man seemed to have been erased. Colour of hair, character of eyes, even physical features of face, body and hands seemed to have been lost in an horrific homogeneity, a levelling down to human anonymity. a kind of dehumanization which made them all one. It was a

deathly similarity, a depersonalised levelling of the human factor until these things seemed like bony automatons, visiting inhabitants of another world, come to blight the cheerfulness of our creation.

Strangely enough, Leon was not one of them. He was, but then he wasn't. He was thin, gangling, his skin like that of an elephant—scabrous, pellagrous. Yet there was a light in his eyes, a glow in his personality. Kerry took me to meet him and I knew at once that the experience of suffering had not destroyed him. In fact it must have added a lot to him because Kerry was surprised by his new stance.

'He was never like that,' he said, and he seemed intrigued. In fact he puzzled over it for some days. 'Leon was so ordinary,' he said, surprised. He added, 'He was just mediocre; that's a fact.'

Kerry and I visited the men of the battered contingent. It was hard contacting those who had receded from life, but after a time some began to emerge. The care and concern of the medical staff helped to awaken them and restore some of the lost confidence. Most of all, dignity began to return, elements of their past humanness. Light began slowly to dawn in the eyes. Some, however, remained withdrawn, protected by a deliberate somnolence. Preternaturally aged they suspended their personalities, hanging, as it were, in some limbo where emotion was frozen.

Not so Leon. His eagerness, if anything, developed. Some might have thought his brightness was feverish, born of an unnatural temper. This was not so, it was just that he had unusual reserves of person, depths and dimensions which were continually expanding. He had, you might say, an enlarging spirit.

There was the night we invited him to the group meeting. He came quite happily, walking slowly and assisted by Kerry. Group meetings of any kind can be intriguing and this one no less. There were between thirty and forty

thoughtful men. Each one had a Bible. That was a high score. Kerry and I used to lead it. We were making our way quietly through the Gospel sections of the New Testament. Leon was excited, listening to every word. Sometimes he would be puzzled, but for the most he was joyful, even rapturous. He would exclaim aloud at times, which was unusual for our group pattern. It was just that thought after thought flashed in upon his open mind. For some of us it was stunning to see a mind that grasped all, understood it, assimilated it, and yet remained hungry to gain more.

The meeting was held in the hospital X-ray room. The X-ray facilities were meagre, the equipment poor, the supplies strictly limited. All group meetings were forbidden for fear of planning by the prisoners. Many thought the end was drawing near. Each day the secret radio-receiver brought news of allied victories and hope was rising, even if only faintly.

For months the silver bombers had come flying high in the blue heavens. Sometimes they were so high that we had to peer with concentration to catch the sun on silver wings and fuselage. They were there all right, and the drone of the fleet was sweet as it was deadly. The dreaded whine and whistle of the falling bombs was the high overtone as the ack-acks cracked and spat. Their 'pom-pom' thudded out in the skies as 'planes droned over, inviolate. 'Flying fortresses,' they called them, and so they were. The plucky Zeroes who chased them exploded and mixed with the flack of exploding ack-ack shells.

The Japanese garrison must have sensed that the end was near. That was why they forbade meetings, and many a night we heard the heavy boots on the gravel outside our meeting place. Thick black paper shielded our lights and at the sound of footsteps we would mute our eager voices.

No one fleshed out in the Kranji Camp, yet the returned men from Burma-Thailand at least fleshed back to our own

state, thin but able to feel alive. The horror which had deadened them was being replaced by the hope that somewhere in humanity dignity might live again. So they, too, began to live. The numbed spirits felt tremors of life, nerve-ends that began to tingle, life that began to flutter.

Leon grew strong. He did not always simply listen. Sometimes he would draw from his remarkable resources and begin to share his knowledge of God. He was quietly simple but also beautifully intimate with the Father-God of whom he spoke. We, for our part, wondered how it had all happened, but we did not care to ask him. We had heard rumours of God-experiences in the midst of death, human degradation and vast suffering. Some, who had been spectators of the events, ventured fragmentary descriptions. Others kept silent about it. They seemed a little awed by the events they had seen.

Then one day Leon told the story. Its details are still with me, etched in my memory. Some of them—the more poignant—are burned into my brain. I doubt that in seeking to retell what Leon told us that I can really recount them all. I choose to leave some where they are, for some are not to be told to the children of men. It is unseemly to disclose all that men can do to men.

What I can tell is the statement of a cultured brigadier-general who had been to the best schools of England, a university and the highest military academy of that land. He confessed, 'I did not know that within the space of twenty-four hours a human being could be reduced to being an animal.' He was speaking of himself.

As Leon said, the conditions were indescribable. The pressures were such that human powers were unable to contain them.

'When they put us in those closed trucks,' he said, 'we

seemed to feel like animals, stock that was being transported willy-nilly. That began the process of taking away our humanity. If we had suffered humiliation before, whilst at Changi, then this was unreliable degradation. There was little air, the heat grew as we headed north, the darkness added to our confusion, and all things combined to stifle us. Then there was the smell of the rose-bowl with the stink of urine and our faeces mixed. Come a jolt and the cans would tip, spilling over us and across the floor. The train wouldn't stop for these emergencies. That was when some men lost hope. I guess they felt the loss of their dignity.'

We sat in the room listening to Leon's voice, and at the same time had an ear for the footsteps of some enquiring Jap guard. After a time we forgot our immediate captors and listened solely to the story.

We traced the long hot journey as the cattle trucks bumped their way to Thailand.

'When they opened the trucks some of the men had fainted. They were dragged out and an attempt made to revive them. There was an opportunity to eat a little, but then the rain was heavy. I think we Tommies were worse than you Aussies. We just didn't know what to do in all that jungle, but some Aussies got a fire going and made tea. It was terrible to see the mad rush to get it.'

'The whole affair was a disorganised shemozzle. Long before they opened the trucks the pains had begun with me. Others were groaning, disabled by dysentery. Some had gone into attacks of dengue fever and others were in bouts of recurrent malaria. I had had dysentery before, but with human excreta all about us things seemed to have worsened.'

'I wanted to go over to a tree, lean against it and die. I staggered from the cattle-van, tripped and fell. No one picked me up and I crawled across to the tree. I was just going to lean against it.'

Leon paused, and a silence fell around us. Moments

passed silently as he thought about that hour. He went on.

‘Someone had gotten to the tree before me. I thought he was asleep.

“‘Shove over a little, mate,’ I said, but he wouldn’t move. His eyes were closed. I pulled myself up alongside him. He didn’t stir. The spasms were on me again and I went behind a tree. There were groans and cries everywhere. When I came back he was still there.

‘The ground was wet but the rain had stopped. I put a hand on him gently to see whether he was asleep. That made me look closely at him. Suddenly I knew he was dead, and in a flash it came to me that he had decided to die. He had made up his mind to sit and die. I had thought the idea, but he had accomplished. Even in my pains I was a bit awed by it all.

‘I moved away, trying to find another tree, but a Nip officer came and we all had to get on our feet. Some cursed but they did it. Others just lay there and were prodded with bayonets or roused by the dreaded cry of ‘Kurra! Kurra!’ Some stumbled as they tried to hurry, but others lay there for ever.’

Again the silence. A rat ran along the bamboo poles that supported the attap-palm leaves. Nothing stirred except the thoughts of our minds.

‘It was the marching,’ said Leon. ‘Hours of it, mile after mile. The track was muddy. Feet sank ankle-deep. It was tiring to pull them out. You made a kind of rhythm of it. In; pull; out; in again. The spasms came but you were not allowed to stop. Sometimes you just had to let the excreta run down the legs. Humiliating? But then what could you do? You just didn’t care.

‘They did give us rests every hour or two, but even then they were impatient. They needed a break too, but less than we did. They didn’t see our side of it, naturally. They had always been well-fed.’

Leon looked around and smiled gently. ‘It would have been the same with most of us,’ he said, looking at us all. ‘You would have preferred death, too. I just wanted to lie down and die. I thought that would be a beautiful relief.’ He smiled solemnly. ‘I began to dream about it,’ he said. ‘I began to have visions of calm, quiet death.’

His gentle smile became a trifle rueful. ‘Others had the same idea. I saw them at every stop men who lay out on the grass, arms stretched wide as though someone was crucifying them on an unseen cross. They just laid themselves down and quietly died.

‘Some lay there, then rolled over and were gone from us.’ Leon stared again before his eyes focused back to the present, and to us.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘dying, that is the idea of dying, was growing larger and larger. It was getting bigger, turning into a wonderful dream. It would be an escape from the ghastly gut pains, the endless, deadening weariness. I just wanted one huge, unending, eternal sleep. That seemed like an enormous bliss.

‘We marched on and on. Our legs obeyed us, but our minds had given out. We didn’t hate any more. We didn’t cry out against what was happening. There was no protest, no acceptance: nothing but deadness, suspended neutrality. All was blank. Thought was grey and undefined. Yes, that was how it all was.’

Again the silence as Leon paused. Time flowed over us and around us: it was not just time, but life. We were able to understand the numbness, the despair which moves into grey inertia and toneless apathy.

Leon looked around at us. ‘I’ve learned Who God is and what He has done,’ he said. ‘I mean, you fellows have taught me. I have learned a thousand new things.’ He became excited. ‘You have given form to things I knew in general and which had become intuitive to me. It isn’t just

doctrine you have taught me, but you have given reality form and shape.'

He laughed. 'Does that sound stupid?' he asked.

We shook our heads. Kerry said. 'It has all become real to us where we are. You battled it through in Burma-Thailand. We battled it through here.'

'Ah, yes,' agreed Leon, 'but I could never give it form. What you have has come out of your Bibles and your experience. Mine all came from experience alone, and even that was only a vision.'

'Only a vision.' We did not quite understand. Leon nodded, continuing with his story.

'I was obsessed with this idea of dying, he said. 'It was like drug helping me with the pain and the weariness. Of course it did not lessen the pain. It helped me to live with it.'

I marvelled at that. 'Do you mean to say that your hope of dying helped you to live'?

Leon stared at me. His face was thoughtful. 'That sounds like a contradiction, doesn't it?' he said. 'Hope of dying helps you to live.' He nodded. 'Yes, that was it,' he said definitely, 'but then I suspended all thought of what death would bring other than release from my gut pains, my anger at the circumstances, my intolerable weariness.'

I noticed how pure and unconscious his speech had become. His sentences flowed freely. His prose was near to poetry.

He continued. 'I kept saying to myself. "Next rest-break I will do it, just like the others have done it. I will lie down and die." I kept seeing the men who had done it. They had succeeded. So could I.'

'Once I actually tried it. I kept facing myself up with the dreadful suffering that had been laid upon us. I kept telling myself that death would take us all anyway. We would never see home. The injustice of that would make me angry and I would revive. The bowel pains would take me into the bush'

and a hurried motion. The staring guards would force me back into the column and we would be on our way.'

He paused. 'I just wasn't ready to die at that point,' he said. 'You have to have no emotion. You have to be dead inside before you can die outside.'

He went on. 'This was the last section of the march for me. The grey mist was around me again. Even thought of dying was no longer conscious. The pain did not recede but just possessed me, and I let it do that. The huge nausea I had known enveloped me so that the sweat poured, bathing me all over in icy coldness. I marched on like an unseeing ghost. I dragged my feet as they say the zombies do.'

We could see him, Leon, and we trudged with him. 'How can you walk, and yet be inert?' asked Leon. 'Yet that is how it was. When we stopped I threw myself down. I was cunning enough to slip between two trees before the Nip guards saw me. I wasn't going to have them stop me dying. I lay there, passive, and I said, "Leon, this is the moment. This is release. Now you will escape from it all."

'If the pain had not been there it would have been wholly peace, but the pain was coming in terrible paroxysms, searing my gut, and sending an ache through all the body.'

'I lay back, waiting for grey clouds to flow towards me, fold over me, and take me into nothingness.'

'How long I lay like that I do not know. It was true, of course, that I was dying, and a calmness had begun to flow about me. There were no clouds of greyness. There were no clouds at all, but only some kind of hush. I was oblivious to the groans and cries of others. At the side of the road, between the trees in that northern jungle. I was dying. I was terribly, terribly tired, and soon I would be asleep.'

Leon stirred where he sat. His voice dropped until it was quiet and gentle. 'That was when the vision began.' he said softly.

We strained forwards to hear him.

'It was a vision all right,' he said. 'No doubt about that. It was a vision.'

Some of us did not quite understand the idea of visions. They belonged to the realm of the Bible days. We had had our dreams of course: but then visions... We scarcely knew how to handle that.

'It all seemed very natural,' said Leon brightly. 'As I was lying there I saw my mum and my dad. It was as though I could have put out my hand and touched them. They were so plain. What is more, they were washing up the dishes after a meal. Mum was at the sink and Dad had a tea-towel.'

'Mum was saying, "Dad, there's something wrong, and it is to do with our Leon."

'Dad was nodding. "I know it is Leon," he was saying. "He's in trouble."

"Great trouble, Dad." Mum was saying, and she was nodding her head. She seemed quite sad.

'Suddenly Dad stopped wiping the dish he was holding. "Mum," he was saying, "Let's pray for our boy."

'Mum was weeping now, but she nodded away, her head going up and down. Then they were praying.'

'That was all,' he said. 'The vision ended there.' 'Ended there?' I echoed.

He nodded. 'Yes, ended.' he said again.

'After that I stood up. So help me, but the pain was gone. I suddenly thought, "There is no pain. I'm not tired. I can go on." So I went on. When the column formed again I walked with them all. There were no pains, no spasms, no weariness. Inside I was singing. Suddenly I knew God was God. I knew He was alive. I also knew He cared. I knew my dad cared and my mum also. I was not alone.'

He looked at us and his eyes were bright. 'That was the day I came alive.' he said. 'I joined God, so to speak. I didn't know much about Him. You fellows have taught me a lot, but I actually came to know God then. When we

marched during the day the blue sky was just beautiful and the green jungle really wonderful. I still cared for the men, especially for those who were my mates, but then death was not terrible and life was not frightening.'

He paused, and we all sat in silence. Within us joy was welling up, but we felt no need to express it. Leon's vision was as clear to us as though we ourselves had seen it. It was so true, so authentic, so intimately domestic. Some of us sighed with the peace of it all.

Outside there was the sharp tread of a Japanese guard, a stopping and a pausing, and then a going on. We could hear the noise as the gravel was crushed underfoot. None of it mattered. We were the untouchables. We were the ones who knew the mysteries of death and of life.

As we sat, so the peace kept flowing about us. It flowed over us and through us and we sat on, not wanting to move, knowing that nothing mattered, really, except of course, God. God mattered very much.

I was supposing that if God mattered, then so did we.

The serene look on Leon's face matched the very thought I was thinking.

FROM DEMONS TO DELIGHT

‘Mary, called Magdalene from whom seven demons had gone out.’ ‘... Mary Magdalene from whom he had cast out seven demons.’

This is how Mary of Magdala is spoken of in the Gospels of Luke and Mark. In fact she is mentioned in all of the Gospels and appears as a strong-minded woman, wholly devoted to her Master, Christ. It is not difficult to understand why this should have been so: he had delivered her from seven demons.

Seven demons! Who would know what that could mean? Who of us has ever been inhabited by one demon, let alone seven? What does it mean, to have such forces inhabit one’s life? Many have conjectured that the evil we do so plays havoc with our heart and conscience that we call those movements within us the work of demons. To a degree it is true that the fearful motions of guilt and human shame do move us powerfully, but then they are wholly disorders of the human conscience and heart. They are not demons.

The demon is a personal force. No matter how violent is human hatred, and how vitriolic the resentment of the heart, or how acidic the bitterness of the human spirit, its movements differ from the baleful evil of demons. These often glare from human eyes with an inhuman look. They contort the human body and spirit in inhuman ways. They are parasitic upon the personal elements of human beings. They constitute fearful enmity as they seek to demean the human race.

That is it: they have a hatred of the nobility God conceived when He made man of the dust of the earth and

insufflated him with His own holy and life-giving breath. Man sprang into being, a beautiful and regal creature. He was unique amongst all creation. Only for a little while was he to be lower than the angels. One day he would judge them.

Demons seek to make obscene the creation of God. It is as though they envy the image of the Creator-Father. Because God has crowned man with glory and honour he must be quickly demeaned. Only his obscenity will satisfy the Evil Prince and his myriads of demonic powers.

It is pointless to speculate on the origin of demons and even on their nature. What we do know of them is the effects they have upon human beings. Mary Magdalene must have lived a life of misery and uncertainty, let alone one of continual terror. We know from other accounts that demons shook people violently, inflicted them with weaknesses, sickness, and infirmity. Most of all they possessed the minds and bodies of their hosts. They robbed them of their true humanity.

It was the uncertainty of it all that troubled many. One would not know what time of the day the fiendish creatures would commence their devilry. Never to know peace. Always to have the threat of sudden invasion, sudden possession—this was hellish.

Humans without demons have problems enough. The conscience is a tyrant where guilt exists. The human spirit, because of its sins, feels strange motions of powerful tides within, but at least these are part of being sinful creatures, erring humans. Demonic forces, however, are of another order. They are strange, cruel, ruthless, relentless. Their inhuman delight at dehumanising man can only be known by the unfortunates who have acted as unwilling hosts to these evil beings.

We are not told when, where, and how Jesus cast out these seven demons. We can, however, read other accounts

of his ministry of exorcism. How sharply and firmly he spoke to these unclean parasites. ‘Come out of him!’ ‘Be quiet.’ ‘Leave him.’ We are told he rebuked the demons. We can imagine then how he found Mary possessed by her tormentors and dispossessed them of the unfortunate woman.

Doubtless her gratitude knew no bounds. We can sense something of her sheer relief. Persons who are rid of their guilts by Christ’s word of grace know the tremendous sense of release which floods them. Peace flows in. The conscience is calmed. A quiet joy possesses where once was tension, frustration, anger, resentment and fear. The once-tossing sea is now calm. A serene peace and tranquillity reigns. By contrast the liberated life is in a new heaven or paradise.

The gratitude—as with most women—worked itself out in practical ways. In Luke chapter eight, verses 1 to 3, we read of a group of women who had been healed by Jesus. Some—like Mary—had been released from demons and others had been healed of infirmities. Some sicknesses, it appears, were of demonic origin. The band of women, we are told, ministered to Jesus and his disciples ‘out of their means’. Some of the women were well-related in society and seemed to lack no material security. Socially they seem to have come from different strata, but they were one in their desire to serve from love and gratitude.

They are mentioned first of all as ministering in Galilee, but at least some of them are recorded as following him to Judea and Jerusalem. In fact they were called, ‘the women who had followed him from Galilee’ (Luke 23:49, 55). We are not told what they did, but doubtless they cooked meals, washed clothes, and generally encouraged the band of followers. At least one mother, Mary the mother of James, was present with the group of women.

Without doubt Mary Magdalene must have developed her love for Jesus. Romantic interpreters see a man–woman

love developing between her and Jesus, but there is little to encourage us in that view. Some must forever see physical love as being inevitable when two are thrown together as were Mary and Jesus. There is little to indicate this was the case.

We watch the progress of the little band as they journeyed towards Jerusalem. The larger caravan doubtless encapsulated the smaller one of Jesus and his followers, but as they entered Jerusalem both those of the city and those who had arrived with Jesus honoured him in the event of Palm Sunday. Having arrived, the band of women were continuing spectators of the events, and Mary Magdalene no less than the others.

They watched at the Cross as Jesus and the thieves were crucified. There is a poignant verse describing this. ‘And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance and saw these things’ (Luke 23:49). We are not told who the acquaintances were. They could have been the disciples. John’s Gospel records that John was present and close enough to the Cross to address him. Perhaps Peter was not present, as he was afraid of being identified with the Man. On the other hand Christ’s look may have drawn him on to watch the last hours of the tragedy.

We do know that the women watched and that Mary Magdalene was one of them. The prophet Jeremiah had once cried, prophetically, ‘Is it nothing to you, all you that pass by?’ He had added in anguish. ‘Look, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, wherewith God hath visited me in the day of His anger.’

Doubtless they had looked, and seen, and recognised the wrath of God, not personally against His Son, but wholly upon the sins of mankind which Messiah was bearing at that

moment, in his body, on the tree.

They watched also as the event concluded following Christ's cries of suffering, of triumph, and of final resignation to death. Womanlike they were practical. They saw how his body was laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, and they set their intention to return after the Sabbath, bringing spices and ointments for his death. The tragedy had been completed. All was finished. Nevertheless their love remained. They would do what women could do.

Even before dawn Mary was at the tomb. She could not wait, even, for daylight. At least one—‘the other Mary’—was with her. Salome is also mentioned. There is not the slightest indication that any of these women expected his resurrection. Strange this, because Mary of Bethany some days previously had celebrated his death by her extravagance of love. She had anointed his living body with nard. Had she intended also to celebrate his resurrection?

None came in this spirit of celebration. Certainly not Mary Magdalene. Like the others she came with spices and ointment— She expected to see the body of her Lord, and perhaps by the sight of it to be reminded of the wonderful days she, had known of dramatic release from ruthless demons, the sudden joy of total liberation, and the continuing friendship with Jesus, accompanied as it was by love, security and peace.

He was not there! The body had vanished! They were stunned, not only by the emptiness of the tomb but also by ‘a vision of angels’. The Gospel accounts at this point do not easily harmonise. Generally speaking, however, the events seem to have taken the course described below.

There was first the event of an earthquake, an appearance of God, the stone being rolled away from the tomb by

angel of the Lord. This angel addressed the women, telling them Christ had risen. They—the women—could verify this by seeing the way the gravecloths were lying. Evidently Jesus had risen through them! This is how Matthew describes the event. Mark and Luke indicate that the stone was already rolled away by the time the women appeared. Two angels are mentioned by them. No matter, the main principle is clear. The women are informed of the resurrection, reminded of his own foretelling of this event and are then sent to inform the disciples, which they do. Mary Magdalene is included as one of those who informed the apostolic band.

John's Gospel indicates that Mary was at the tomb when the two disciples, Peter and John, arrived. She stood at the tomb weeping, doubtless deep in mourning.

Then she saw two angels. One would think this would be enough to terminate her weeping. It is evident, however, that the former message of the angels, ‘He is not here: he is risen!’ had not penetrated to her. Was she, then, too numb to receive this information? Had she gone to the disciples breathless with the news, but then returned as though it were, in fact, no news?

Some understand that she had not returned to the disciples prior to this but had stayed on, determined to mourn her beloved Lord. All her womanly desire to touch the body, minister to its needs in death, had been wholly thwarted. She was robbed of the opportunity to love in this way, and stood disconsolate outside the tomb.

The angels saw no cause for weeping: to the contrary there was all cause for rejoicing. Never had mankind had so much cause! Not, anyway, since the creation of the world. So they asked. ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’

She said, ‘Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where then have laid him.’

She had not believed! All she had expected was a body. And this body she called her Lord!

In the company of Jesus she had spent many hours, some of them in listening. Often he had spoken of his impending death and with the predictions always speaking of his resurrection. This she had not heard, not anyway with the inner ear. She had loved him hungrily, gratefully, and deeply, but not deeply enough. Like many others before and after her she had heard the words of God but not comprehended.

Now there was another with her. Not an angel, but a man. This one spoke to her. He asked a question. 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?'

She heard the words but did not hear the true sound of them. Her grief weighed her down beyond recognition of the familiar accents. Nor could she see the man before her, so blinding were her outward tears, and so unbelieving her inward heart.

'Who could the man be?' her numbed mind asked. Common sense told her. 'The gardener, of course. Only he would be here.'

Perhaps the gardener knew something. 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him.'

Carried him away! Had she forgotten the mighty events of Christ? Who could carry him away?

She was still in her grief. She could hear nothing. Then he said the word, 'Mary!'

She heard. She knew the warmth of her name being spoken. It was no longer 'Woman!' but 'Mary!'

She flew to him. Of course it was the Master. Here he stood uttering the dear old accents. A host of memories poured into her mind. Jesus doing this, Jesus doing that. Jesus talking. Jesus exorcising. Jesus healing. Jesus releasing from demons—into peace.

As she ran towards him to embrace him, he said the words, 'Do not hold me.'

The shock of it. She must hold him. 'Do not cling to me,' he said, 'for I have not yet ascended to the Father.'

'Ascended! Ascended?' What did he mean? 'Do not touch me.' 'Do not keep clinging to me.' But she had to do this. She had to feel him, to know him, to love him.

The nightmare had gone! The terrible time of the cross, the suffering form upon it, and then the limp body—that was all now as though it had never happened. Of course she must cling to him: the old life, as it had been, had to be revived.

Then she began to understand. He was saying, 'I have not yet ascended to the Father.'

Suddenly awe—huge awe—began to take hold of her. Why, this was not Jesus as she had known him. He did not even look as he had formerly looked. The same in many ways, but then greatly different. The awe grew, her hands fell away, nerveless, at her sides.

He was ascending to the Father. Of course: he was the Son of God.

She trembled. For a moment her dream of the past was with her—the renewal of all she had known and loved. Then the dream was gone to be replaced with something far beyond any dream she had ever dreamed. Here was the risen Lord, the triumphant Son of God!

And he was going to the Father! Of course. It was dawning beautifully upon her. God is Father! His words were continuing. 'Go to my brethren, and say to them that I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God.'

Of course, that was it. 'Brethren,' he was saying. He had not put it that way before. 'My Father and your Father,' he was saying. Of course, all God's people were His children.

If one faint regret had lingered for past times, it was now banished, and for ever.

A whole new relationship was suddenly there between her and her Lord. The other had been good in its own time, but like any stage of experience was not for ever. The new

always has to come. Now it had come.

Suddenly she had grown, and matured. She had left the class in which she had been learning. She had entered into a whole new experience and the change was radical.

The weeping woman was now not weeping. She was seeing a new world before in which her risen Master was the King, the Prince of life. Everything had changed, not only for her but all the human race.

Doubtless she took leave of him in a tender and triumphant way, and doubtless she looked behind, often, as she ran to tell the disciples. One statement was beating into her excited, joyous mind: 'I have seen the Lord.' That sight of him would never depart. It would always remain as clear as the moment she had seen him.

'I have seen the Lord!' she cried as she bursts into the presence of the disciples. 'I have seen the Lord!' she kept saying.

Inwardly she knew the sight of him had changed her. She was numb no more. Her immaturity had left. She had no desire to cling, but only to worship, and, of course, to proclaim

There is, of course, an epilogue. Not merely the mention of her name in the Gospels, more than that of other women, but the anointing she received on that great day of Pentecost, the day when the church of this age was born.

She had waited and prayed, along with the one hundred-and-twenty or so who were anticipating the coming of the Spirit.

He came. With remarkable phenomena he came, and as he did he filled the people of God. He filled them to overflowing until all they could do was tell 'the wonderful works of God'.

She knew the wonderful works included the days of his

flesh, of liberation from sin and guilt. They included healing and exorcisms, especially from seven demons. She knew that well. At the same time these wonderful works included the Cross and its sin-bearing, and the Resurrection and its giving of life to all who come in humility and faith.

She knew all these things as, filled with the Spirit, she proclaimed. She also knew that life would never again be limited, not even to the love she had known for him in those days. She knew him now as Lord of all. For her the vistas would be ever-expanding. Her relationship would never be restricted by immature human feelings and love.

Life would continually widen. Her love would abound more and more, in all knowledge and discernment. There was no end to what could be, no fixed perimeter to what she could experience.

All things were hers, now, and in the times to come.

SEMANTICS AND SOME ANTICS

It was not that the doctor was impatient. Not even that he was naturally a restless person. Yet his legs, crossed at the knees, spoke of a natural tiredness. And of course he was habitually a busy man. This had come from years of action in the wards. In a mission hospital you are always needing extra staff. He had learned to do the work of more than one man, and would have been surprised if suddenly the demand had diminished, and the action decelerated. In a way of speaking, he really enjoyed the busyness.

Yet he did not resent the visitor, a missionary from another country and culture. In fact he welcomed him. The man before him had at least a reputation for discernment, and had proved himself in his own field of work. So the doctor liked talking to him. He even felt a mild excitement rising within.

‘You must study the culture of a people,’ he said to the visitor. ‘You must know their patterns of thinking before you even begin speaking.’

The missionary grinned. ‘Anyone begins speaking before he begins talking,’ he said. As the doctor stared uncomprehendingly, he added, ‘Everyone speaks with his eyes, his face, his hands, well before he knows another’s language. Humanity itself is the universal common factor.’

‘Don’t you think the culture matters?’ asked the doctor. ‘Sure. Sure’ the visitor agreed. ‘You can make some significant mistakes just amongst the English-speaking cultures, if you are not careful. Put Americans, English and Australians together and you’ll soon see.’

‘You mean they will find it difficult to communicate?’

asked the doctor.

The visitor shook his head. ‘Not a bit of it,’ he said with a delighted smile. ‘Human beings communicate—whatever.’

The doctor was beginning to understand. ‘You mean that we get through to others, even if we don’t try: even if we, perhaps, don’t want to.’

‘That’s it,’ said the missionary. ‘The folk we come to serve have us sized up within hours. Look at the nicknames they give us.’ He chuckled. ‘I remember the name they gave to one of our friends. “Mr Confusion” they called him. That was delightful. Described him to a T.’

‘But seriously,’ the medical man said, ‘you don’t mean to tell me that the language and the culture don’t present difficulties?’

‘Difficulties, yes, but not insuperable ones. In fact, none that are even substantial. A man who can’t speak your language can understand the things you do. When you treat him with examination and medicine, he picks up the kind of man you are in a moment. He recognises kindness, patience, indifference, conceit. These traits are universal and therefore universally recognised.’

‘But what of theology? What of Christian teaching? How can these come through when, say, a country is Buddhist in culture, practice, and belief?’

‘Fair enough,’ agreed the visitor. ‘Fair enough. But somehow you can break through even that.’ He heard the doctor sigh, perhaps with impatience. ‘I know what you are thinking,’ he said. ‘You told me when I first arrived: that it was a matter of semantics—meanings and communications given by words. You said that in a country which is Buddhist men do not understand the word *sin*.’

The doctor was at last launched. ‘Exactly! This country has no word for sin, as such. That is a Judaic-Christian word and idea. It has not, and cannot penetrate this culture. What contact, then, have you with people who cannot

understand?’

The missionary put his head on one side, looking quizzically at the medico. ‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘is there such a thing as sin in this wide land?’

‘Of course,’ the doctor said, almost impatiently. ‘But they don’t see it as that. They don’t understand it in those terms.’

‘I had thought,’ said the missionary with disarming mildness, ‘that men in all cultures felt guilt.’

‘If it is that,’ said the doctor, ‘they don’t see it that way.’ ‘But is it that?’ the missionary persisted.

For some reason the doctor felt cornered, even uncomfortable. He couldn’t see why, but the feeling remained. ‘I guess it could be guilt,’ he admitted, ‘but they don’t see it that way. They are Buddhists, and gentle people.’

‘Are Buddhists gentle in Vietnam?’ asked the missionary dryly.

‘Who is gentle, anywhere?’ responded the doctor impatiently. ‘I don’t see what you are getting at. The folk here simply do not think in terms of sin and guilt, and that’s that.’

‘I seem to remember,’ said the other man, ‘that you told me many of your patients are here from stab and bullet wounds.’ When the doctor nodded, he added, ‘And why do you have visits from the Buddhist monks?’

‘Headaches, nervous breakdowns, and ulcers,’ said the doctor.

The missionary nodded. ‘What causes these?’ he asked.

The doctor stared back. ‘Nerves, tension, and guilt, I suppose,’ he admitted.

‘Right,’ said his companion quietly. ‘Then East and West are on the same wave-length. Whatever name you give it, guilt is a constant in all cultures. So you start with guilt, and begin to talk about man’s need—the universal need. You know, clearance from guilt.’

‘But you can’t talk about the Cross.’ The doctor was slightly irritated. ‘You know. You must know. The people of the culture in which you move could not understand the Cross.’

‘Agreed. But it is no more understood in the West than in the East. It isn’t a matter of semantics. It is a matter of human pride. The Cross is anathema to human pride—anywhere.’

‘Then take the word *God*,’ said the doctor, persisting. ‘They cannot understand that here, either.’

‘It isn’t what you say,’ returned the missionary. ‘It is how you say it.’ He grinned. ‘What’s your wife’s name?’

The doctor fell into the trap. ‘Margaret.’ He could hear the affection in his own tones. It was good, just to say her name. Suddenly she was there in his mind, although, still, in fact, across at the house. ‘It’s time for lunch,’ he said. ‘Let’s go. Let’s go and see Margaret.’

‘You certainly told me a story about Margaret when you spoke her name,’ observed the missionary. They walked through the corridor, and down the steps. ‘You communicated a lot.’ He smiled. ‘You know, you tell it like it is.’

‘I think I am beginning to see,’ admitted the doctor. ‘Words may not always be vehicles, but somehow *you* get through.’

‘My wife,’ said the missionary, ‘learned the language quickly. She just couldn’t bear not to speak in any language that is around. She simply must talk. You know, when you have something that must be told, you tell it, somehow.’

In the afternoon they took him across the river. The ferry might have been thought dangerous. No one seemed to care. Weighed down so that its hull was level with the water, it chugged away, sending its subdued ‘Phutt! Phutt!’ along the muddy, slightly turbulent water. The fronds of the

palms, and the vines of the green creepers hung into the water along the edge. The people, squatting on the deck, looked with lazy eyes at the approaching bank.

Then they were there. Tony, a lean, black-haired, darkeyed missionary was waiting for him. All he had was a highpowered motor cycle, with large side-bags. They skirted the village and bumped along the red dirt road. 'I'll let you meet Shift first,' shouted Tony with his head half on the side. 'Then we had better get going.'

Shirley had the half grin of wives who see their husbands come, only to go. She conveyed a kind of affectionate tolerance of her husband. She could cope well enough when he was away. Later they would have to face the problem of growing children, but this was right for now. She had an easy philosophy.

After the coffee they got moving. They rushed along the bumpy red road, missing the pot-holes filled with rusty water. The jungle was very close to the sides of the road, even invading it. When the large trucks rushed at them they skirted its very edge. Tony kept shouting all kinds of information. The locals seemed to understand the strange sight of large Westerners, sitting astride the powerful Japanese machine. Some of them—Tony's friends—waved excitedly. It was a different world from the aseptic white hospital. Tony was a man of action. He even seemed to ignore culture.

In fact he understood the culture very well. When he paused at a village he observed the cultural formalities with loyalty, sometimes to the point of gravity. Yet he was full of fun, and the visitor could sense that the man was loved, even for this. He himself stood back, fighting the ridiculous impulse to speak in his own native language, even though he knew it would be foreign in this place. Yet he did want to communicate. So he just grinned, and sometimes made gestures.

The miles sped by. The sun beat down on them, but the breeze took away its sting. Mile after mile of sitting on the pillion had made him a bit numb. Then suddenly they were at the jungle—Tony's special piece of it. The bike ran surefooted along the track. The local missionary certainly knew how to handle his vehicle, especially when they hit a muddy patch. Only once did they have to get off. It was to cross a river with a rough causeway made of loose stones. They both had to have their feet in the water whilst they urged the cycle along. Then they were on the machine again, pulling along a muddy valley and up into the hills. There the track was a little better.

They reached their destination, twisting their way around the winding path. They passed through sugar cane, pineapples and maize. Finally they saw the village. The passenger thought it scarcely deserved the name. It consisted of frail bamboo and attap huts, all very small, set up on high stilts. It seemed a little derelict to him.

Tony was loose-limbed, and used to the cycle. His companion was stiff from the ride. They both made their way from hut to hut. Often the hut was empty, but when someone was home there was a delighted cry of recognition as they saw Tony. The missionary discerned that they were attractive people. He was sure they were Christians.

'Not all,' said Tony. 'But come on. We are heading for that hut.' He pointed to one on the edge of the clearing. 'The husband and wife have recently become Christians. They just love Jesus.' He grinned. 'They have relatives from another village who don't. Maybe we can talk with them today.'

The husband was away, working in the jungle. The wife was there, smiling, her greeting warm. Two other women, one somewhat aged, and one quite young, sat in a corner, holding themselves apart almost primly. They nodded politely when introduced. Some preliminary chatter went

on. The visiting missionary heard the droning of the insects outside the hut. He felt the heat upon the attap-palm fronds which constituted the thin ceiling. He almost drowsed as Tony chatted with the wife. The relatives also sat silent, listening.

Then they were singing. The wife had a thin hymn book, and was proudly singing as she read. In fact she didn't need to read, but she had learned to, and this was a great thing. After singing they prayed. Tony leaned across to the visitor. 'You speak,' he said. 'I'll translate.'

The missionary suddenly remembered the conversation of the morning—with the doctor. They had been brave words on his own part. 'One communicates, whatever!' He smiled to himself, thumbing through his Bible. It was in English. He was in the heart of a jungle, with people whom he did not know. 'Semantics,' the doctor had said, 'that's the problem—trying to line up with another culture.'

He heard a voice he had heard many times before in similar situations. 'Just speak to the heart.' He leaned forward, smiling, and commenced reading the passage. Tony began to translate it. The listeners sat with calm faces. The missionary finished the reading, and began to explain. Every gesture he made came from his heart, but his mind was thinking clearly. Tony duplicated his words, his gestures, his intensity, his tone. The two men seemed to be one. The hearers unconsciously leaned forward, listening. This visitor didn't have a theory to present, or even a very special proposition. He was telling things, as he knew them, as they had come to him.

Then the message was finished. It was an old message. He had given it hundreds of times, in varying forms. Today, as on other occasions, tears had come. When they bowed for prayer, both missionaries knew something had happened in the hearts of two women, one somewhat aged, and the other much younger. Christ had been here already, in this jungle.

waiting for the moment—or, making it come, you could say.

The ride back to the road seemed much shorter. Both the men felt a new vibrancy, yet even that experience was not new, only fresh. They had more or less expected it. They scudded into a storm, drenching themselves, but they rode along in it. They had to get back before the darkness, and the last ferry. The water from the road, as it spurted up, was warm, but after a time the rain soaked into every part of them, and their teeth chattered. The fingers on the handgrips of the cycle were numb.

But they felt no lessening of joy. They held their miracle within them. Once Tony shouted out, above the roar of the machine and the sound of the rain, 'When you have something as good as that, you have to tell it somehow, eh?'

The missionary nodded, and grinned. His face felt stiff when he did that. He didn't mind the rain, though. He was still grinning, as they headed towards the ferry.

THE WORD IS IN THE TELLING

Father! Sometimes in the telling
 The Word becomes anguish.
 It is the agony within
 For the knowing, the knowing deeply,
 And the deep glory of the knowing:
 But with the knowing—the strong knowing—
 Is the pain of telling.

Not only is the pain in the seeing
 Of the veiled eyes, the lack-lustre staring,
 The trained reflexive rejection,
 The skilled avoidance of repentance:
 But also in the eyes deliberately dulled,
 The hooded obscuration of the truth,
 And the blindness of contracted not-seeing;
 The heart-refusal, the ear-stopping,
 All of this the intended deafness
 Against the liberating Word.

This is the pain, the hurt, the anguish
 Of telling the word of inner knowledge:
 Since the same word with convicting power
 And splendid releasing has emancipated
 From the dreary futile dullness, the neutrality
 Of mindless unhoping, of lethal cynicism
 And raging despair. So seeing the sightless,
 Hearing the unheeding, catching
 The vapidity of the deliberately dull.
 One thus knows the insensate ache, feeling
 For the savants of contracted obliviousness.

My son! The Word is the Word, timeless.
 It was uttered prior to time, in time itself.
 It is the Word of creation—the creative Word.
 It is the Word of the ancients—as for them—
 Those true visionaries, who seeing God
 Heard also the Word as from God: to them
 It was the Word of Covenant. Also it became
 The Word of true prophecy, the prophetic Word
 Guiding the motions of the aeons, fructifying
 Where sin's sterility would seek to neutralise
 The dynamic creation—celestial and terrestrial.

My son! The pain of non-telling
 Comes from the losing of your faith,
 The pain keening along the hurt heart
 Because of rejection. Hurt there must be
 But hurt is on the instant healed
 Since uttered Word is the dynamic
 To polarise and bring rejection, as also
 To create, and heal and recreate.
 Rejection is the sign and proof
 Of the Word's power. Deeply within—
 In the lonely reaches of the numbed spirit—
 Life is for stirring. The awakening is there
 When the anger simmers and the despair fulminates,
 Rising against (it thinks!) the uncaring Deity,
 The merciless and unhearing Word-Lord.
 My son! These are the fixed illusions
 Of the ones denunciatory and bitter
 At My Eternal king.

Withhold not the Word! Let not its fires
 Destroy the marrow in your bones,
 Dehydrate the soon-flowing torrents,
 Embitter the sweet substance of love.

Let flow the spate of the Word,
 Let it flow against the dry, and the sere,
 Against the ancient deserts of the drear spirit
 Of life-rejecting. Let its renewing love
 Find out the nooks and crannies, the dull recesses
 Of the labyrinthine soul, until life
 Breaks in salvific glory, penetrating
 To the inner heart, the defended citadel
 Of the retreating ego.
 The Word alone will emancipate.

The Word is a cool balm upon the hot anger:
 Is healing for the tortured mind, the wounded
 And lacerated heart. It is life-for-death,
 And glory for the embittered spirit
 Crouching in the despair of shame.
 It is the brilliant Word, revealing the Father.
 It is the Word for living, re-animation of the dead.
 Withhold not the utterance;
 Restraine not the declaration,
 Imprison not the proclamation,
 And cry without fear. The Word liberated
 Must liberate, my son! Thus your own spirit
 Will sweeten with the publication of love.
 Cool soothing will come to your internal fire
 As the unhearing hear, the blinded see
 And the light dawns in the no-man's land
 Of depthful despair!

SAME STORY— DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW

Simon's Story

To be quite frank, I scarcely knew how the woman got there—in my house. I mean. If you are aware of our culture you will know that we do not forbid onlookers at our feasts—only as spectators, though. You are possibly aware that the fame of a feast such as a wedding will draw many folk, just to watch. You may also know that, since our weddings continue for many days and are so costly, we ensure that bona fide guests wear a wedding garment so that no one can pretend to be a guest when he is not.

To get back to this unhappy woman. She had got in somehow. She was what you might call ‘a woman of the street’. It does not take much to pick them out. Frankly I would have thought that my guest would have recognised her for what she was and have refused the attention she paid to him. It was more than a little embarrassing to have the incident happen in my house.

I say it modestly, but I am well known in our city. My name is Simon and I belong to the holy and godly people called Pharisees. You will know our origins are quite famous and that we are men of deep zeal and piety. For my part I felt, as a Pharisee, that I ought to discover for myself what this Nazarene was about. Friends of mine had heard him give a long sermon near our city of Capernaum, and I had watched his progress with the ordinary people. I have to confess to being sceptical. I felt the man was deeply suspect, for he used none of our accustomed modes of preaching and

teaching. I find it difficult to accept novel methods. I am, you might say, a traditionalist.

When I invited him I had a certain distaste for him as a person. It is our custom to welcome guests with an embrace, and generally a kiss. They are then assisted in certain ablutions of hands and feet, given towels, olive-oil to anoint the face; thus they are set at ease. We then proceed to the feast where we recline on long, low divans, and after the blessing of the food, we eat from the long, low meal-table, leaning on one elbow, whilst our feet dangle behind us. It is all very relaxing.

I must admit that I could not come at the normal welcoming courtesies—the kiss, the embrace, the provision for ablutions—for this fellow. I just didn't feel I wanted to express any acceptance of him. It is not the place of a dignified Pharisee to encourage itinerant preachers who appear to be charlatans. True, I was curious to know what he was about, for the stories told concerning him were quite remarkable. However, I have judged these radical fellows to be fly-by-night types. They have a deep attraction for the common people but when they are gone, nothing of value has resulted to our nation.

The woman was plainly maudlin. She seemed to have had some sort of grief and the sight of him set it flowing. There she was, if you please, washing his feet with her tears. I daresay it takes a lot of tears to wash feet. The man, of course, had the dust ingrained, for he habitually walked many miles. In our culture the feet are the most soiled portion of the body. Even servants dislike the task of washing them. It is extremely humiliating to have to do so. The highest insult you can offer is to take a sandal or shoe and hold it over the head of an enemy. This is a sign of his defeat. Conquering kings of course did just this when they defeated their foes. They made their heads their footstool.

No matter; there was the embarrassing situation. The

Nazarene was eating, the woman weeping, and at the same time washing his feet with her tears. Then she further added to her shame by unloosing the braids of her hair, allowing it to tumble down. She used it as a towel and dried his feet. Then she anointed his feet with an ointment which doubtless she normally used in her trade. The fragrance of it indicated a costly type of unguent, but then I imagine that is how they do it.

What I found most repugnant was the way she kept kissing his feet. It was, as I have said, maudlin. I kept thinking to myself, 'The man calls himself a prophet. Prophets are discerning. They know what is what and they send sinners on their way smartly! I find this man sickening in his inability to discern blatant immorality. He is positively encouraging the woman.' You must surely know that in our temple worship we relegate such people to the Court of the Gentiles. We permit them to be spectators but forbid them access to the court of sacrifice. Religion would quickly reach a low ebb if we lowered our moral standards.

Now I come to the most amazing part of it all. As I was eyeing the woman, and, I suppose, being contemplative of her, this fellow actually put me on the spot. He caught my eye and gave me such a look. Frankly no one has given me that kind of look. You can call it penetrating if you wish. But then why should he choose to subject me to that kind of gaze? I admit to a sense of uneasiness which he evoked in me.

He said, 'Simon, I would like to say something.' 'Feel free to do so,' I said. What else could I say?

He told very simply the story of a man having two debtors. One was heavily in debt. The other man's debt was quite superficial. In an act of unusual kindness the creditor forgave both debtors. 'Who then,' the Nazarene asked, 'would love him the most?'

The question was put very simply to me, but I felt awk-

ward. For one thing I could not even see the point of it. Then I became quite uneasy. I could not be sure but that the fellow was suggesting that I, along with this wretched woman, was somehow a debtor. She. I could agree, was a moral debtor. Being a Jewish woman she would be regarded as a great sinner. But then how could I be said to be a debtor? I am—as I have told you—a Pharisee.

The whole matter was quite incomprehensible. He went on to make statements which were so distorted as to be unfair and wholly unacceptable to those of us who are orthodox people of God. I mean, the man had the effrontery to say that this woman loved him deeply and that I was dry of such love. He reminded me that I had failed to give the courtesies of embrace, kiss, ablutions and the anointing of olive-oil. Strictly speaking he was correct, but then I have given you my explanation.

As for the woman, he highly recommended her for the unseemly attentions which she had applied to him. I thought he would have found them highly embarrassing, if not, in fact, indecent. But no, he seems to have savoured them.

To crown all, he made the incredible statement that all her sins were forgiven. Forgiven! Just like that! Anyone knows that no man may forgive sins. God alone can do that. I tell you I was grateful at that moment that some of my guests—true guests I mean—spoke up enough so that the Nazarene could hear what they said. Rightly enough, they complained at this departure from true faith and practice. They asked, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ I can hear the deep irony in their voices. In fact, to put it bluntly, they were openly sarcastic.

Well they might be. Our law allows for the forgiveness of sins, but only through the true sacrifices as Moses set them out. None can forgive sins but God, and this Nazarene would not dare to say he was God. Blasphemous thought!

I shall quickly bring my story to a close. He let the woman

go, but before doing so he said. ‘Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.’ I ask you, does faith save one, or is it not works—true, pure, godly works? The talk of the Nazarene was highly offensive to most of us. In fact it proved what was suspected from the beginning, that this man was no theologian. He could not be accepted in his teaching and practice.

I tell you it was a relief to have the support of my friends, my honoured guests. Yet sadly enough I have to admit that I was greatly shaken by the whole incident. I must confess that the man indicated a whole world of which I know little, if anything. The passion of the woman for the itinerant teacher was quite remarkable, even unique in my experience. I suppose I could dismiss the whole event if it were not for the fact that the woman felt she had genuine cause for her affection. I must also admit that she was unusually at peace with the words of forgiveness which he presumed to utter.

The whole affair unnerved me. Although I found my friends supportive, the man has left me with this uneasiness, and I cannot wholly throw it off. I keep thinking that if he were right then something is wrong with me, terribly wrong. This of course could not possibly be. I keep telling myself that, but I can’t always convince myself.

Then I wonder why I failed to give the man the courtesies which generally I extend to others. My inability to answer this question is what seems to be at the root of this perpetual unease.

I keep wondering whether I may, some day, resolve the whole matter. I trust so. I trust so.

Her Story

Oh, how my heart is singing! I have just left the Teacher at the house of Simon the Pharisee. I am still amazed at my

boldness in going there. It is not the sort of thing that is done by a person like me, or rather, like the person I was.

Everything has changed. What I was once I am no more. I have become a new woman, a new person. It is all very wonderful. Perhaps I had better start from the beginning and give you the whole story—as I see it, anyway.

What I should first tell is that I have lived a terrible life, a life of wrong and evil. Once I may have excused myself by saying that I scarcely had a chance, my circumstances being what they were. Well, thank God, I don't have to cover up any more. I can freely admit I was wrong. How wrong no one will know except those who have done what I have done. The terrible evil of it all takes its own toll and is its own punishment.

For years the guilt and the shame must have built up but I suppose I just brazened it out, covering it up and hardening myself against inner accusation and nagging conscience. I simply argued that life hadn't been kind to me, and that I had to live anyway. Well, it just wasn't life. The tragedy of it wasn't simply the immorality so much that what I did was a contradiction of womanhood and personhood. They say relationships are what life is all about, and they are right. My tragedy was that I never had a true relationship, and that is a fact. I learned that if you ever have bodily union with another without a true relationship, some damage must result. It is not simply that the matter is commercialised. The whole thing is a mockery of the reality and so it goes on causing damage to both participants. It is wrong, empty, dreary and dehumanising.

I don't want to go into all that but simply explain that I was a woman entirely without a future. In some ways I had really ceased to be a woman at all. Since all hope had gone for a real life, I had hardened myself to get what I could while I could. When you have the memories and facts of hundreds of futile and destructive relationships within you

then the tragedy is compounded. If you do not harden yourself you may be destroyed in other ways. I am sure you can understand—in part at least—what I am saying and what I mean.

All of this was so until I met the man from Nazareth, the teacher who was beginning to become famous for many of his sayings. At first few of us were interested, especially my kind of person. However things filter through, and certainly his statement that people's righteousness had to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees was a radical notion. Naturally we were amazed to hear that he had said to the religious leaders that 'the harlots and tax-gatherers will enter the Kingdom before you.' This of course his listeners could not accept, and many became angry.

My personal contact came when I heard him utter a wonderful invitation.* He simply said, 'Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' Well, I had not believed that possible. In a flash, I knew that I was such a one, and I also knew just how heavy laden I was. I had never dreamed one could be rid of it all: but suddenly I knew in the depths that it was all gone. This was exactly what he had offered.

He also said, 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me'. Of course I knew what he meant. Jeremiah, our prophet, had once said. 'It is good for a man to wear the yoke in his youth.' The yoke means discipline and direction. As a child and a teenager it was against this restraint that I had rebelled. Now, however, I was ready to be taught. I know that at that moment I began to love this man. I wanted to follow him. I wanted to show him I loved him.

* The woman's narrative is, of course, purely imaginary. However it is possible, even probable that she heard Jesus utter the words of Matthew 11:25-30, if indeed this passage follows chronologically that of Matthew 11:1-18 which accords with Luke 7:24-35. Gospel chronology is an extremely difficult subject. The main point here is that she *heard Jesus say something* before she ministered to him. Her faith and her love had been *in operation* before she entered Simon's house.

That is why I went to the house of Simon the Pharisee. You may say the conditions were ideal. That dry old religionist wholly neglected Jesus. All the things we do to our guest, such as a loving welcome, ablutions and the like, the Pharisee did not do to Jesus. In a way it was a bit of an insult. Perhaps they just wanted to catch Jesus in some way. I really don't know.

When it comes to shedding tears I have to tell you it was a long time since I had done that. But I did on that day, in a way I had never dreamed. They just welled up from inside. Years and years of hurt and shame, anger, bitterness and resentment burst up and out of me from my very depths. I sobbed and cried: I wept and it all flowed out. The more I wept the more peace came to calm me.

I let those hot, scalding, salty tears flow over his feet. At first they ran down as runnels that scored tracks along the skin, washing out the ingrained dust. Then his feet were soaked and I let the hair tumble down over them as I dried them, only to have more tears and more drying.

I could not stop from kissing and kissing his feet. Why not! It was sheer relief, full release, total love. I took the ointment I kept to use for other purposes, and anointed his feet.

I know the Pharisee disapproved strongly, but I could not care. This was the one real act of love I had ever done, and I was standing by it. No dry religionist was going to cheat me out of it. I simply ignored the guests who likewise disapproved and went on with my task of love and gratitude.

To my joy and amazement I heard Jesus talking to the Pharisee. I could scarcely believe that he was making such a defence of me. He likened my case to that of a debtor deeply in debt to a creditor. The Pharisee, I suppose, was a debtor who only had a little debt. I distinctly caught the irony in Jesus' voice, as though he thought the Pharisee only imagined he had a little debt. I gathered the impression that no

man has a little debt with the Great Creditor—God. However, I cannot really be sure.

What I do know is that when he questioned Simon about the two debtors, especially as to who would love the creditor most on being forgiven, that he meant me. I would love God because He had forgiven me much. 'Much' is a simple word, but it had to cover a whole history of sin and failure. And so it did.

Jesus said to the man, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house: you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.'

This Teacher had missed nothing. How delighted I was. Yet he said even more: 'Therefore I tell you, her sins which are many are forgiven: but he who is forgiven little, loves little.'

In a flash I saw it. I was the great debtor and knew it: but I was forgiven. You may think Jesus meant I was forgiven much because I loved much. Not so. I loved much because I had been forgiven much. How could I have loved if he had not indicated that I was forgiven? That is what he had meant by the story of the two debtors and the kindly creditor.

It did not worry me that the guests grumbled and said such forgiveness was blasphemy. I was forgiven and I knew it. I was free and I knew it. I could sense the glorious liberation from past impurity and defilement. The new sense of purity was stunning. I felt fresh, free, and virginal. Womanhood was flowing back like a returning tide.

Mind you. I agreed with their question although I rejected the tone of sarcasm: 'Who is this who even forgives sins?'

Did they not know? I knew, because I knew the past was gone, and I was a new person. Who, indeed, was he, this

Jesus? Who but the promised Messiah, the Holy One of God!
It was his final word which shall ever live with me. He said. 'Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.'

Of course I had believed but then that was not difficult. In a way I feel sorry for Simon and his household of guests. They seemed to miss the whole point. Perhaps one day they too will believe and be free. If only Simon could see that his sins, even if not like mine, are many! If only he could see the size of his debt, and then be glad it is forgiven!

However I must not talk on. Let me say simply that I am at peace. His pronouncement has sealed my freedom and my new life. Of course I have abandoned my old ways. This new life is one of faith. It is one of purpose.

Of course, above all, it is one of love.

THE DAY AND DEATH OF GUILT

She sat, her hands on her lap, looking down at them. They were hands with long, tapering, competent fingers. They had hurried through the housework so that she could get to this meeting. Perhaps you couldn't really call it a meeting. It was a coffee morning. There were other women there also. They were busy now, putting out the plates of cakes, of delicious sponges, and all the foods she should not eat. The smell of coffee from the percolator came richly to her nose. It smelled strong and good.

She glanced over the other women who were there. Some were hard and brittle in their conversation, as though not wanting to reveal anything, keeping the talk small and detached. Yet through it they were communicating an anxiety. She could not discern whether it was a regular anxiety, or one for the occasion.

'Well,' she thought, 'what an occasion!' They had a preacher in their midst. She had more than a little bitterness for preachers. Her memories had not always been happy ones. It was not because they had ever done anything to hurt her. Nothing like that. But she resented their failure to help her in her times of need.

She laughed faintly at that thought. She had never actually applied to one for help. Whilst she had felt the need, she had demanded that they sense it and come to her. She believed they should seek out people—even invade them to give assistance. She flushed with a slight anger when she realised that she still cherished a hope that one would do this. 'It's too late,' she said to herself. 'Too late now, Things can't change. Not at this stage.'

Her anger stiffened her somewhat. She looked about, almost haughtily, at the chattering group. What would they want here but some social intercourse. It wouldn't go deep. In this northern town of this vast continent, people didn't open their minds. They kept their emotions to themselves, except of course when they became maudlin with drink. Well, it was coffee this morning, so they were safe enough on that score.

At that moment the speaker walked in. She might have been excused for thinking he was a mild man. He was softly spoken, and greeted each person warmly, with only the faintest detachment. 'He is gentle,' she thought. Then some thing like panic gripped her. She was afraid of that gentleness. She asked herself. 'Why am I here?' and wanted to run. It was silly to expect release after all these years. Such things only happened on the stage.

Her womanly intuition made her suddenly aware that the same drama was being enacted in most of the women. They were all aware of the power of the visitor, and afraid too. She saw that their movements were calculated deliberately calm, a cover-up for the emotions beneath.

After the coffee and the cakes he was introduced. The hostess was a bright, warm woman named Eloise. She had a history of befriending people and helping them, though never possessively or obtrusively. Now she was speaking calmly, as though an occasion such as this were not unusual: as though there were no threat that at any moment the veil might be taken off the gathered women.

Her eyes flicked from person to person. She knew their stories. Some were divorced and remarried. Others were teetering on the edge of divorce. Some simply kept up appearances. Others were successfully married, but not happily for all that. A few had their outlets in painting and writing. Others busied themselves with the social service clubs. They were all occupied in some way or another.

'There was a man.' said the speaker, 'a Jewish theologian. He once said. "Messiah can not yet have come, for man has not yet been radically changed.'" He smiled apologetically. 'Radically.' he explained, 'means "at the root". I guess when you look at us today. not too many have been changed radically.'

Some of the women nodded. Most were silent, waiting. Some were trying to feel the moment, wondering whether it could be that special moment for which they had waited, which they had not really thought would ever come.

'A man can be radically changed.' He grinned. 'I mean a woman, too. In fact.' he added, 'there is nothing which cannot be made new.'

'Nothing?' she said bitterly inside herself. 'How do you reverse your life, roll back the years and start them anew?' Then she thought, 'Even if you could you would probably do things in much the same way.' She stared at him, hopelessly. Suddenly she wondered why she had thought she could find an answer. 'Eloise has, though.' she mused. 'She's fine: integrated: superb.' She rolled the adjectives along the edge of her tongue.

The speaker was coming through again. 'Christ said he makes all things new. I could give you many examples of this. Women followed him almost as much as the men did. No breath of scandal, either about that kind of following. He did something for them. He liberated them, one after another.'

She settled back under the spell of the sonorous voice. Sometimes he stabbed out at them from under the gentleness. They did not seem to take it amiss. Occasionally tears came to the eyes of one or another. A few were suspicious. They mistook gentleness for a smooth plausibility. But it was not that.

She felt the words breaking through, getting down into her. She was both pleased and alarmed. It was as though she

could not hide behind her old wall. Gaps seemed suddenly to be in it. She took to the defence, analysing his words, imputing motives, parrying his thrusts.

He was defenceless enough. Time and again he asked questions which, of themselves, were innocent, but which exposed him to the women. A few were bitter, hurt by their past. They even attacked him. Each time his smile and an obvious truth would halt them.

'He's got what Eloise has,' she reflected. 'It's a strong love that just doesn't pity. It deals with the problem. It gets to the hurt.' She was no longer afraid of him.

'Guilt.' he was saying; 'get rid of that, and you're free.'

She breathed inwardly. How do you do that? Who has, ever? She gave herself the answer calmly. Eloise, of course. This man, undoubtedly. Me? A bitter-sweet pang shot through her. Could you be clean again, wholly? Could you grow strong again, resurrect your shattered dreams? Could your marriage and your motherhood suddenly recover, be rehabilitated? Has anyone recovered the 'first fine careless rapture'?

This man had an enormous knowledge of persons, including women. He knew how their minds functioned. 'Why,' she realised suddenly, 'he knows how we are. He knows how we are thinking.' Yet she was not afraid to look at him. His look was strong, understanding, objective.

Few of the women had refused to talk. They were at it now, talking excitedly. It was as though hope had been renewed. Some of the questions were regular enough. Is marriage permanent, final, indissoluble? Can the past really influence a marriage? Do children really have to suffer because of the parents?

He had no slick answers. Indeed he scarcely answered any of the questions directly, as though a direct answer were no

true answer. He kept steering them back to his central point—Christ delivers men and women from their past. He takes their past into himself. He enters into their present. He assures their future. In this way they become new.

When he closed with a prayer she saw a woman weeping. Others were stimulated, and were talking among themselves. He edged towards her. He said directly, 'You understood that, didn't you?'

She nodded. 'I can see what you are getting at.' 'And do you receive it?' he asked.

She nodded. 'In my mind I do. But not in experience. That would need a revolution.'

'No,' he replied, 'it would make the revolution. Forgiveness, and cleansing of guilt takes away what a person was, in order to let him be what God has created him to be.'

'How does this work out in a marriage?' There was nothing casual about her question.

'You mean a marriage where husband and wife have drifted, and where coming middle-age has brought disappointment. Where the children are beginning to make demands upon parental authority, and where neither can fully cope.'

Her eyes widened. 'How did you know?'

'It's always written on people's faces,' he said. 'You don't have to be brilliant to see it: only experienced.'

A faint look of sadness came into his eyes. 'We all hesitate to intrude into what we call privacy. That's why preachers often do not get to people—people who need an invasion, but seem not to want it.'

So he knew why she had been resentful. Well, he was invading. 'I want you to help me,' she said, simply.

They moved to one corner. 'You have guilt.' He was direct. 'It is the pre-marriage guilt. You failed there.'

She had never thought she could have tears. Now they were welling up, near to her eyes. She had fought the

memory, telling herself that it didn't matter, that time had healed all that. Yet she knew that time had done little more other than to etch it more clearly.

'Your man is intended to be your leader,' he was saying. 'And if he fails in this matter, along with you, you are disappointed in him. For his part, he looks to see a beautiful purity, one that is stronger even than his emotions. He is likewise disappointed. When you get to marriage you find that what you anticipated by prior action is not even there. This most beautiful thing has been thwarted. It was what was intended to get the marriage into orbit. It is divine love given to men and women to find each other, in the depths, but it must be within the structure God has given it.'

She felt like a child, one who had missed its most important lesson because it had failed to be alert. Now, years later, she was hearing it. Even in spite of its late hearing it was beautiful, and exciting.

'All the universe is functional,' he observed. 'All is an essential harmony. When we interfere with that harmony we suffer. We miss what was set out for us. We get something that already is selfish in character.' He looked at her. 'Both the man and the woman are disappointed. In their hearts they know they have failed each other. Yearning only leads to further frustration. Deep down guilt is doing its work, eating away.'

He paused, and quietly watched her face for a few moments before continuing. 'You know it is the one subject on which the two never talk. They hide their disappointment, failure and guilt. They keep private the very thing they should share. Guilt is able to cover up itself, seal itself away. Yet when the children come, and then grow—say to teenage—and face the same problems, fear starts to surface, and insecurity with it. It is about your age that the married couple needs to be absolutely one, for their own sakes, and even more for the sake of the children.'

'And if they are not?' she asked steadily.

'Then the children have to be special,' he said. 'They have to be in the way of God's help. They can make it if they will.'

'And what of the two?' She meant the man and wife. 'Is there any way they can "make it"?'

'Of course.' His eyes were warm and intent. 'That's what we have been talking about this morning.'

'What is there for me?' she asked. She wasn't afraid any more. She knew she could pursue the matter. There was something of great value in it. This man would, of course, call it 'Christ'.

'*Repentance*,' he said simply. 'It is a beautiful word. It means "Change of mind". It is a gift from God. You just use it. You change your mind about the past. Not only about that significant sin, but about all sins. You change your mind about God. You believe in His love for you. Then you come to Him for forgiveness and cleansing. That's what Christ obtained for you, and for your man, by the Cross.'

She had not known it could be so soon that it could come, so quickly. It was something which was happening. She had thought it would be gradual, something to be worked up to, to be earned and gained. But it was simple; just a believing, and a wanting, and an asking, and then a having.

She nearly gasped with the sudden sensation of cleanliness. She felt relaxed, free of tension. She felt that God loved her. She also knew She loved God, and she was surprised. It was good, just loving God.

Then she loved him, her man. The bitterness had disappeared, vanished. He was new, as she was new. She saw him freshly, with new understanding. Something she had kept back all the years now wanted to give itself. She wanted to run to a phone and ring him, but she stood looking at the preacher.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘Thank you.’

‘And thank Him,’ he said. It did not sound sanctimonious, but just right. ‘Keep on thanking Him, and you will keep it fresh. The human race made its big mistake when it stopped thanking God.’ He smiled. ‘I think someone else may want to chat,’ he said, releasing her.

She sped away. When she stopped to find the car keys in her purse, she looked at the time. The whole thing—coffee, cakes, and all—had taken ninety minutes. The Cross, of course, had taken longer. She smiled for the strange thought.

Eloise was busy when she left. Anyway, she could see Eloise later. She drove away, her feet and hands automatically using clutch and wheel and gears. She saw the arch of the blue sky ahead of the road. There were neat, bright gardens, brilliant with flowers and shrubs with leaves of various hues. Everything seemed cleaner, clearer. ‘It’s all fresh,’ she said. ‘It’s all new.’

She drove on, feeling relaxed. It was a curious feeling, a new feeling. She decided she liked it.

Yes, she surely liked it.

A FOUNTAIN IS FOR FLOWING

She scuffed her way through the hot Palestinian dust. Her sisters before her had always gone to draw water daily. She was doing the same. Her water pot was on her shoulder, empty. In a way it symbolised her—always going to draw something, always needing something. At the moment you might describe her as empty, listless, almost lifeless. She scuffed her way on to her destination, feet barely lifting above the hot, dry dust. Perhaps it was the day which made her feel this way. Perhaps it was just age coming upon her.

Beneath the hooded veil the eyes stared at the familiar scene. There was nothing much to stimulate her. Little did these days. In fact her eyes took in little of that which was now so familiar to her. For many years she had known the city in which she lived, and the well to which she went daily. They said that a sturdy ancestor had caused the well to be built. He must have been a persistent, dogged man, for it was very deep. They said it went down for hundreds of feet, and they were right. She had to lower her pitcher each day, and she was well aware of the strong haul wards.

This ancestor of hers must have been a wealthy man, to have had the well dug. The tradition was that he was a family man of extraordinary character. Her gaze flickered as she saw the well in the distance. She plodded on, a lone figure on a lonely landscape.

There were other reasons for her loneliness. Others knew these reasons. Right at this point she was lonely because every day she made her water-pilgrimage by herself. The

other women just did not come out in the heat of the day. They preferred the evening when the sting had gone from the heat. Then they would come—a laughing, bustling, happy throng—sharing the day's doings, and bits of gossip, making fun of the local things of life. Her memory stirred. Time was when she had walked with them to the well. They had been good days.

These days were different. She preferred not to walk with the other women. She knew they liked it that way, also. When she was there they could not gossip—not about her, anyway. She felt their gaze keenly, from time to time. It would be on her, wondering. Other times she felt their questioning, and even their scorn. It was better to walk alone. In a dreary kind of way she enjoyed her isolation. It helped to numb her, to insulate her against the tides of desolation that rose within her, and beat against her desperate shores.

Numbness was better than suffering. She bent her head doggedly, pressing against the heat of the day, her fingers gripping the pitcher more firmly. She was carrying her despair with her. Drawing water was something to do. She would do just that, as she had every day, although there seemed little purpose in anything she did.

Her mind flicked back, with some distaste, to the house she had left, and the man living with her. The sigh that escaped showed she still lived with a little of feeling, but then the feeling was riot good. She brushed it aside like the occasional fly that flitted about her. She looked at the well as it appeared and as it enlarged in her sight. Even at this distance she could see someone was there. She thought she made out the figure of a man. At first she slackened her steps, not wanting to meet anyone. As a woman she should not be alone with a man. Then an instinct hurried her feet. She sensed a diversion and welcomed it.

The man was a Jew. She could see that, both by his facial appearance and his mode of dress. She had always liked men, for reasons best known to herself, and her interest in this one was quickened. Physically he was much as most men are—vigorous, young, well-bodied—and in other ways he was not unusual. His features were pure Jew. Her own features were Samaritan, and she knew her own race was hybrid. Not that she was not as fiercely proud of it as her fellow countrymen. She liked being the Samaritan she was. She could still register hostility with Jews, especially when they showed their scorn. Even now, in all her numbness, she was ready to bridle.

His voice was soft. He had watched her preparing to lower the pitcher. His gaze was keen, but then, too, it was gentle. He said simply, 'Give me a drink.'

She felt the communication. It was a plea. The man was tired. He was thirsty. Yet there were reserves behind his human weariness. She sensed them. She felt an urge to return the communication. In other ways she knew nothing could come of it. Nothing ever came of anything. She said simply, 'How come that you, a Jew, ask of me who am both a woman and a Samaritan? How come that you talk with me?' She meant, 'You know the conventions. You know the enmities. Why do you ask?'

He said, 'If you had known the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.'

She did not miss what he was saying, although his words were strange. She heard the phrase 'the gift of God', and another, 'living water'. The gift of God she knew must be of some wonderful order. Not just 'a gift'—for God gives many—but 'the gift', something incomparable. Then she thought, 'Living water? Living water is running water, water that flows up and on.'

She said, 'But where would you get this water? See, I can draw this water, but you can't. Are you making out that you don't have to toil and dig to get it as did Jacob and his entourage? Do you have some special way of giving water that is not stagnant?'

'Not stagnant!' That was a statement. If ever anyone knew stagnancy she did. Her whole inner self was like that. A piling up of nothingness. Not mere ennui. Not voiceless boredom alone, but that terrifying emptiness of which the Preacher had spoken. He called it, 'Vanity, wind, nothingness, vast vacuum.' Soulless purposelessness, meaninglessness, deadly apathy: she knew it.

What had he said? She asked again. He had said, 'The gift of God'. She scarcely knew what the term meant, but she knew the man was making a high claim and a great offer. She even sensed that such a gift would change her situation. She fought back the hope. It would be deadly to hope, as she had hoped many times, and then to fall into terrifying disillusionment, suicidal despair. She trod hard on the hope.

'If you had known the gift,' he had said, 'and the person...' The next words had been, 'You would have asked'. He had concluded, 'He would have given'. She saw the principle. Want; know; ask; receive. She shook it off. She stuck to her statement about great Jacob. At the best he had given the well. This man was emptyhanded. He was a mere man, and a Jew at that.

He said slowly but firmly, 'Everyone who drinks of this water shall thirst again.' She knew that to be true. Every day she came. Drawing water, taking it home, drinking it, coming again. It was like her life. Drinking at the fountain of humanity. Thinking you were satisfied. Then having to come again, and again, and again.

He was saying, 'Whoever drinks of the water that I give him will never thirst.'

Somewhere she had heard that God was the fountain of living waters. Out of Himself, ever active, ever gushing up, ever flowing out. Ever satisfying. But the man could not mean that. He was a man: not God: not even Father Jacob.

He was still talking. 'The water that I shall give him will become in him a well of water, flowing up to eternal life.'

She could not cope with so many things in so short a time. Too many significant statements in one sentence: 'a well': 'flowing up': 'everlasting life'.

She had a vision of a fountain, flowing up within her. At first she wanted to be mirthless in a cynical way. A fountain to flood out her ennui, a gushing flow to purge her emptiness, cool fluid to quench her deep thirst, a welling up of true life, pure and new. She shook her head. Not only flowing up, but reaching up, to eternal life.

She knew the fear of death. All human beings know that. She knew her emptiness was death in one of its forms, and already come, too. But the feared thing beyond the death of the body—it haunted her, like it does all on the earth.

She looked up at him. 'Sir,' she said directly, 'give me this water. Quench my thirst. Save me from coming time and again to this well.'

He looked at her. He knew the well she had drunk from. That was a deep well, also. But to drink of it was to thirst even more. No thirst had ever been slaked at that well. Call it lust, call it sex. Call it a substitute for the love that satisfies: he knew she had drunk deeply, to her hurt and her shame: and now to her death-in-life.

He said gently, but firmly. 'Go, call your husband, and come here.'

Her heart sank. Memory returned. The dream was shattered. The young hope was pinched out of being. Of course he was right. She had almost taunted him with breaking the conventions. Now he was insisting upon them. Of course

further talk was out of place. A spectator would already have judged them to be immoral: up to no good, so to speak.

She said limply, 'I have no husband.'

He nodded, indicating that he had known. 'How right you are,' he said, 'when you say you have no husband. But then you have had husbands. How many? Say, five? And the present man, the man with whom you are living, he is not even your husband.'

She should have felt burning shame. Long ago shame had given way to cynicism. Hardness had come over feminity. Relationships had become calculated. Yet this man was pure: that she knew. Why then not the sense of burning shame? It was a curious fact, and she wanted to understand it.

So she listened. She listened whilst he told her all she had ever done. Not just the five mere and then the other, or the others, but what lay-behind it all. He was not reminding. He was not accusing. He had no lustful interest in her failures. He was telling them, but as he told them a miracle was happening.

They were dissolving—those sins, and hurts and failures. There had been shame in the early days, and despair. Then resentment had come, and bitterness, and with it all a pushing and a thrusting and a striving to reach the true satisfaction that a human knows is a kind of birthright. Somewhere there must be satisfying and fulfilling union. Somewhere two people must mingle and become one: not merely simulating union without ever finding it.

As he spoke the hurts died. The pain faded. The old stoic hardness dissolved. Life flowed again. The experience was like a rich fantasy. Guilt came out at the roots. The clouds which had gathered around her head as they do on high mountains were gone and the brilliant sunshine tumbled and played around her.

But it was inside where everything was happening; at least it was beginning to happen. The old emptiness which had been like hunger gone on too long was now being filled. Not yet a flowing fountain, but water quietly moving up from the depths. He was telling her all she had ever done, and with the telling it was fading, being dissolved, becoming as though it had never been.

She stared at him, uncomprehending. She had come out into the day, and on to the well in utter hopelessness. That had all faded. Within her something was welling up. She had a sudden flash of insight, a vision of herself. She was young again, fresh and free, but yet without broken dreams. Her feminity had come to her, but purged, purer than ever it had been.

There could only be one explanation, and she uttered it. 'Sir,' she said, 'I see it now. You are a prophet.'

She was awed, but not terrified. The prophet spoke directly from God. No other man had either this power or privilege. A prophet knew all things. She said, 'Who then worships correctly? Who worships in the truth of truth?' This was a thing she had to know. Always she and her people had argued, and often uneasily, that the Jews were wrong, and they—the Samaritans—were right. Everyone knew the history of the first worship when Israel had entered old Canaan. Right here the worship had taken place. That was long before David had taken old Jebus, the place he transformed into Jerusalem. No matter how great a sinner one was, one had to worship in the correct manner, and in the right place. She posed the question to him. She needed to know the answer. Somehow it was terribly important.

His answer moved her deeply, for it was stunning. It was also one she could understand. He was saying, 'Woman, you must believe me. There is a time coming, and indeed this time is right on the doorstep. It is confronting us. Worship

will be neither on this ancient place of worship, this very mountain on which we are standing, nor in that holiest of places, Jerusalem. This will not be the set place for worship of the Father.'

Her mind stopped at that word. He was not just talking about God as God, but God as Father. She stared at him. 'Father!' The word stung her. Then it warmed her. It already raised tremors of response, nerve-endings that tingled. She had never called God Father. Indeed she had not thought of Him that way. Yet from this man's lips the term seemed so natural.

He was saying, 'You worship what you do not know.' Yes, she had to admit the truth of this. Her religion had many curious things, some even frightening. God Himself, as God, had not appeared. She feared Him, but did not know Him. Had she really known Him things might have been different. Had she known Him as Father they certainly would have been different.

He was continuing. 'We worship what we do know, for salvation is of the Jews.' That was definite enough. Intuition told her the Jews had kept things pure. Salvation was what all men needed. She had needed it more than others. She knew that.

He said, 'The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship *the Father* in spirit and in truth, for such *the Father* seeks to worship Him. It was all coming to her with a rush, but he went on. 'God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.'

She found she could understand it all, at least in some measure. 'God was Father. He demanded His children be like Him. He was Spirit—not just an unseen thing far removed from man, but warm and near. They—His children—could correlate with Him because they had come from Him—as children. But as any father demands the same family spirit, and absolute honesty, utter truth in life and

relationships, so did He. In fact He was seeking people who would have it this way, and do it this way. He was seeking them to worship Him.' To the woman this was very simple. A child adored its father. A daughter worshipped the man who loved, protected, guided and aided her. So would a daughter do to the Father. This was wonderful, yet understandable.

She looked at the man. She did not know his name, but she knew he was deeply wise. He was also powerful in the things of the Spirit. She said, 'I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes he will tell us all things.'

She wanted to know the 'all things'. She wanted to know even more than the man had told her. Rather, she wanted to know more of what he had told her.

The day was suddenly in suspension. The heat hung poised. Time ceased its normal unchanging movement. All about was quiet as he looked at her.

She had said. 'When Messiah comes...

He said to her, 'I am he...'

Suddenly confronted, she was stunned. She had known, and yet she had not known. She had felt the alchemy of his words when he dissolved, for her, the horrifying past. She had felt her numbness fade, and new sensations come. She had seen darkness recede, and light come in a wide dawn. It had been as if those five men—and yet even more—had silently departed from her, confronted by some great force so that they had had to withdraw. Their old intimacies, and their death-dealing passions had been swallowed up in a gentle mist. Cruel memory had been blotted out in new, sweet grace.

And now this was Messiah standing before her. The Messiah of her old Samaritan Scriptures, and of the Scriptures the Jews had added to them. Both were filled with intimations of Messiah. And this one had come talking about the Father, about a new rich worship.

Warmth flooded her. The sweet union she had always sought, and failed to achieve, through the dreary motions of the flesh, she now found in the presence and action of this man. She would have to stop staring at him in wonder and astonishment. She could have no more of him than he had given her, for he had given all she needed. She had a fleeting glimpse of her old self, scuffing her way to this ancient well, feet shuffling in the deep dust, and dust rising up in clouds to settle again over her dull soul. Then it had all been hopeless.

Now, suddenly, she realised a fountain was flowing up within her, and she wanted it to flow out. Indeed it was doing just that, and the water of it was spilling away.

Out of one corner of her eyes she saw some men coming towards them. Jews they were. Friends, or followers no doubt, of this wonderful man. She needed no more encounters. Suddenly she knew she belonged to her city. She had great things to tell them. Best of all, 'Messiah has come!'

She gathered up her flowing robe, feeling a new joy and power surge through her. She ran towards her town, the cry welling up within her, 'Quick! Come and see a man who told me all that I ever did!'

She ran on and on, crying out the urgent words. They must not miss this man. For lack of her proclamation they must not miss the great moment of which the prophets had spoken.

They gathered around her. This they had not done before. Before they had stepped aside. They did not agree with her customs, her wrong ways of life. But this did not seem to be the woman they had known. Her eyes were alight, beautiful with a new joy. Her whole being was urgent. She kept crying it, gasping it to them all. 'Come and see a man who told me all that I ever did!'

Inside she was saying, 'Yes, and who finished all I ever

did. Who gave me forgiveness and cleansing, and set me free. He exorcised the past encounters, the terrible shames, the unholy liaisons, the empty failures.

So much she knew about Messiah. So much she could tell. The rest she could not. She did not know, not explicitly anyway, that it had cost him a *cross—the Cross*—to say what he had, and to do what he had. Not yet was that Cross, but it was there, at the end of the road. It was there, waiting for him.

The men had gone running to the stranger. They had interrupted the conversation he was having with his followers who were urging him to eat, and to drink. These Samaritans wanted Messiah to come and to stay with them. The woman had convinced them something of amazing dimensions had happened.

So they listened. They listened because already they had seen a woman with a fountain flowing up in her, and then out of her—'rivers of living water'—so to speak. In the forty-eight hours that followed they could not but be convinced that this was the darling of the prophets, the burden of the great predictions of God. This was truly Messiah.

This was the Saviour of the world! They told that to her, in gratitude, in excitement, in confirmation of what she already knew. Dynamic as it had been for her, so too it was dynamic for them. This little outpost of a dying sect, hedged about in a small portion of Galilee, suddenly had cosmic vision. 'Saviour of the world,' they had said, and of course she had agreed. 'We believed,' they said, 'because of your word.' Of course, Why not? But then they had added, 'Now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world.'

'I believed.' she thought, 'and everything changed for me. Now you have believed, and everything has changed for you.'

She could smile at that. Indeed, she could smile at all

things. The gift of God had come to her. She had known and asked, and when she had asked He could not withhold it. He had given it. In that great gift she had found the flowing of a fountain. She knew the zenith of that flow; the highest point of its climax was eternal life. She knew the gift was forgiveness and cleansing, and the exorcism of the past. She knew—perhaps best of all—that it was being the daughter of the Father, and the precious, intimate worship that came with that relationship. There was the headiness of truth and purity, and the knowledge that man is not flesh alone.

One of the things she liked now was going out to that well, but no longer alone. She preferred to go in the evenings, when the women went, and then they chatted about the things of everyday. Even the little bits of gossip she did not mind, provided of course they were touched with the clean salt of grace. She rather liked the idea of being part of the family.

DISCOVERING IDENTITY

Who am I, Lord?
I think I do not know,
Know not from whence
Nor where I go. Wanderer
Following trackless seas
And never really being me:
Who am I, Lord? Who then is man?
Two questions dog me every day
And flog my tired mind.'

'Who are you, man?
Who are you, child?
Creature that's lost,
That's gone awhile
From the glowing dawn of festal day,
Created son to Father God.
Creature to mild Creator too.
And loving King's dear subject rare.
This was true man, flesh wrought in love:
This you were once
This you must be.'

'What was my centre, noble King,
My heart of love, my dear delight,
The object of affections full,
Drawing my soul securely,
Rooted and grounded in what?
Where was the changeless rock I clung.
The goal and object of my hope?
What was I when once truly man?

The secret lies within Your mind,
Tell me my being, ceaseless God.'

'How would a child reject the love
Of Father immutable, Creator kind,
Becoming a lonely god itself
Who spurns continually its King,
And seeks to mould all time and space
To fit its patterns autonomous; Denying
My brilliant common grace,
Mapping new paths of reckless sin,
Twisting affections fearfully 'til
The true identity is lost? Thus—
All moorings slipt—the spirit's loose
In wild and restless seas.
Lone wandering soul, proud evil flesh,
Allied to demons, idol-possessed.
This you became in wilful pride
Rejecting the primal gifts.'

' How then, great Father, Creator-King
Does the lost return, the lonely find
His place of being, essential core
Of what he was. return to be
What once he was, what he must be?
How does he spurn illicit joy,
Heady autonomy, lawless control
Of all the gifts You gave, his squandering
Of precious life and able powers?
How then regain that life's fresh flow
When now is death, murky dark
And spirit forlorn and twisted mind
With vicious anger intertwined,
To make him hate himself and God?
How can he now emerge?'

No man is changed of his own will.
His will is fiercely gripped by sin,
Narrow his spirit and confined
Within the evil he has planned.
The son is dead, the creature dim,
The servant proud, too proud to serve
The moorings slipt, the spirit's lost:
Speak not of human motivated hope
Or self-renewal. No spirit can
Find for itself its primal home
Or open up its heart to God.

Too gone is man for self-return
But God has come to man.
Has come in mortal chuckling flesh,
In clear-eyed Son, in Creature new
Walking the plains that he once wrought,
Called Galilee, Judea and Zion,
With pity on a captive child,
A heart deranged, a creature bent,
Locked in the vice of mortal sin,
Raging in mind and spirit hot,
Hating the God who gave him life,
Clinging with wild-eyed stare to mind.
That pulls the blind on mem'ry rich
Of primal festal day when he
Was sonly-creature, servant-lord
And prince of all creation fair.

No man of self-volition can
Return again to God, or know
The surging of old life afresh.
The primal gift from Love's own hands.
This chuckling flesh must twisted be
Where nails will pin it to its cross.

Shaped from Eternity in Father's love.
 To draw the errant angered heart
 To rich renewal, washed pristine.
 Until it's surging sigh uplifts
 Astonished spirit to the eyes
 That flow in love and shine in grace;
 To know the truth of God Himself—
 The Judge no other than true love
 Redeeming dead and lost and base
 Drawing with cords of silken grace
 Back to its moorings, its only place
 Of true identity.

'Then come My son, My creature-child:
 Be noble lord in your new place:
 Be wholly servant in the power
 Love gives afresh to you.
 Come leave the idols of the choice,
 Compulsive in your savage breast,
 And passions wild and errant will:
 Turn in your sight to moorings fair
 That call and beckon to your mind,
 And promise hope when hope was not.
 Come to Me. Child, and know yourself!'

There is no answer in the wind,
 No crying terror, changeless fear:
 There is no shriek, no wild despair,
 No anger bitter, surging hate:
 But eyes in calmness stare ahead
 In speechless joy, tranquillity
 Tasting serenity, new and rare.
 And nameless peace that bids the fear
 Eternally be gone. In that same gaze
 Nobility enlarges. regally flows

From the new stature, creature mild
 Who slips its hand and draws its heart
 To Father-God. The spirit found
 Worships the Son whose glowing face
 Has eyes of flame, motions of love,
 And all the while the Spirit draws—
 With gentle love—returning son
 To ancient moorings, place that's true
 To fit renewed identity.

PAIN

The tall fair doctor smiled gently. 'We might even get rid of your pain. No promises, mind you. We can never promise anyone.' His smile seemed to be to himself.

The patient was not moved. He heard, but he did not believe. At the same time he did not disbelieve. He held himself to be strictly neutral. There had been times—now hidden in the past—when he had hoped eagerly. His eyes flickered at the memory. Great stores of hopeful joy had manifested themselves and he had risen to them. Each time it was like a blind that had shot up, letting in the brilliance of sunshine, blinding but beautiful. Then the blind had been pulled down and the old darkness had come back.

He had not minded the darkness before the flipping up of the blind, but he had minded it after it had been pulled down. Even so the darkness became his normal light, a light in which he sensed, even saw, many beautiful things. Now, looking at the young doctor, he thought, 'No pulling up of blinds, please. No beautiful brilliance if you do not mind. Just let the pain be.'

The pain: it had been with him these thirty-five years. It was a constant grey companion, silent but substantial, and never cruel. It was like a person who is persistent, gently teaching something, but what this was he, the pupil, had never come to know. Yet he had accepted the teacher—this constant grey companion—and the teaching.

He told the doctor. 'Thirty-five years.' There had been a flicker of compassion in the young blue eyes. Then it had flitted away, the pure blue becoming clear again.

The doctor asked him. 'No periods of relief?' No periods

of relief. 'Exceptionally acute at times?' Rarely acute. Always the level pain. 'Hurtful?' No, not exceptionally. 'Painful?' Yes, Always painful.

The medico bent to make notes on his War-Veteran file. The patient's own mind hurried off on a jaunt, remembering when it had all happened. Thirty-five years ago. He could even smell the sweet smell of rotting humus, jungle warmth, the spices of tropical flowers, the hot smell of the night, typically and uniquely Eastern.

The section of men had clustered together, sweating with fear and excitement. Their bayonets had been at the fix, but he had a Thompson sub-machine-gun gripped in his hands. Otherwise they were all the same.

In the dawn they had had to go forward, running. All night the artillery barrage had pounded about them, but then, towards the morning, it had lengthened past them. This meant the enemy were creeping under it, towards them. They would be moving evenly with its cover.

Somewhere, close by, a machine-gun began to chatter. It did not sound like one of their own. Its preliminary chatter changed to a yammer, and then the whine of it rose high, close to a scream. Deep down an anger began to grow.

After that they had charged out on to the black road, some covering from the sides, all with bayonets at the ready and he with his gun gripped tightly.

It had happened in short minutes, the section fanning out from him whilst he plunged towards the M.G. nest pitted below the road level. His gripped weapon had begun its own chatter, spitting angrily, until both guns ceased simultaneously. In the moment he received the blast in his leg he knew the enemy gun had coughed into silence. The other sounds went on—the wider sounds—but both machine-guns were silent. He himself was splayed out on the road.

After the shock, the pain. Thirty-five years had not ameliorated the memory. Always the memory was sharp

and dynamic: searing, shattering, and then high, high pain.

That was how it began, and that was how it continued. The shock, the surprise and the thought, 'Oh! Me?' It always had been for another. At least in his thinking. He had seen the others. He had pitied them. 'Me?' he had thought. 'Me, now?'

The medico had completed his notes. 'It's possible, just faintly possible.'

He had replied, evenly, 'Fancy that now; after thirty-five years.'

'We are only finding out now about pain,' the younger man said. He grinned warmly. 'Mysterious thing, this pain.' He shook his head at the mystery of it. 'Quite fascinating.'

The patient said, 'I will never forget that fantastic week without it.'

The medico nodded. 'After all those years it must have been very special.'

'Very. I could scarcely cope with it.'

The doctor showed surprise. 'Do you have to cope with non-pain?'

The man smiled. 'You do,' he said simply. 'When it is with you night and day, then you miss it. You wonder where it has gone. The delight of no pain is overwhelming.'

The medico suddenly became alive and personally interested. The room ceased to be a normal clinic. A man was opening up a new dimension and he did not wish to miss it. His eyes shone. 'So what then?' he asked.

The older man was a trifle shy. 'I imagine there is a philosophy of pain. I used to lie in the hospital, in our prison camp where we had no drugs. I used to think that death would be a merciful white lady, touching the flesh with cool hands and abating the pain. I thought that were there no death there would be no present hope.'

The medico had never known pain, but he nodded. Of course it would have to be like that.

The other man said wryly, 'Pain is a gift, I understand.' He hesitated, looking keenly at the doctor. 'A gift of God.' When there was no flicker of recognition or rejection, he went on a trifle hurriedly. 'Limbs without feeling face great danger.' He saw the doctor nod. 'So pain is a gift, a warning, teaching gift.' More nods.

Then the older man said quietly, 'But where no warning is needed, the pain is redundant.'

The doctor's eyes gleamed. He was impatient at the silence of his client. 'Go on,' he urged.

The returned soldier stared at him. 'Pain without a message could be pointless, incongruous and even false,' he said. When the doctor sat silently he went on. 'You always have to battle for a reason. If there is no reason then pain is irrational.'

The doctor said quickly, 'Pain is pain.' It is neither rational nor irrational.'

The veteran nodded. 'True,' he agreed, 'but pain is intimately personal. It is always with you, and for a purpose.'

The doctor moved a trifle uneasily. 'Pain is pain,' he muttered. 'It warns, it indicates, but it is not a person.'

The patient nodded again. 'But when something unusual happens like the partial severing of a nerve, the nerve trapped in scar tissue, and when pain becomes referred to another part of the body...' He paused. 'Its functional purpose is interrupted. The message is to no end. It does not warn. It just heaps up uselessly.'

'Heaps up?' The doctor was startled.

His patient nodded. 'Heaps up,' he repeated. 'It is not just a thing of the body anymore. It is also in the mind. The mind asks for reason. No reason, and the mind protests. It cannot understand.'

The doctor listened keenly, not wishing to miss anything.

The veteran continued. 'After a time you must accept it, live with it. You must not think in terms of Stoicism, and of punishment.'

'Stoicism?' asked the doctor. 'Punishment? What do you mean?'

'Men are guilty about many things,' the older man replied. 'They see pain as a punishment. They accept it as such and live with it, or they try to condition their minds to be unaffected by it.'

'Some are angry about it,' said the doctor sharply. 'Many become bitter.'

There was a gentle smile on the lips of the other man. 'Quite so,' he agreed. He looked mild. 'All such approaches are wrong. One must just live with pain. It can even be a gift.'

The doctor countered. 'Then why try to obliterate it?'

The patient let the smile hover over his lips. 'Non-pain can be a gift, as also pain can be a gift.'

The doctor thought about it. Finally, because he was guilty about time, he said sharply, 'What is pain to you?'

The gentle look on his patient gave power to his words. 'It is humbling. It keeps one quiet, even sympathetic to others, and I think that matters.'

'And non-pain?' the doctor persisted.

A dreamy smile came into the other man's eyes. 'A superb gift,' he said. 'A foretaste of a time when faith and hope will not be required.'

The doctor felt a trifle irritated. 'I don't understand religion.' he said briefly.

The other man shook his head. 'Nothing religious about faith and hope. Man needs both—whatever.' He leaned forward. 'Doctor, suppose you have lived with pain for three decades and then for one glorious week you are relieved of all pain—what then?'

He was thinking of his own case, of course. The major

surgery, the pain-killer in the intravenous drip, the other pain destroyers and sedatives. Days of unbelievable non-pain. He remembered them now. That was when joy had bubbled from him. He had exercised faith and hope for decades, being sure the pain was purposeful even though he knew no real reason for it, nor had sought to know any. He had lived with a simple acceptance of it. When suddenly the pain had receded, the energies he had used in faith and hope were not needed. They mounted up like reserves of fuel and he was filled with unusual resources. Creative thought broke out of him like excited but vagrant streams.

The doctor was closing the file. He rang for an orderly. He said to the veteran, 'They will give you a time at the desk, but probably we will experiment next Thursday. If we are successful, your pain will be stayed, permanently. If not there is little we can do, other than periodic electric stimulation. That, however, is temporary. We hope the other works.'

They both knew the interview was finished. The talk about pain was over. The doctor had been intrigued but nothing new had come to him, except, perhaps, a little confusion. The patient limped away, not greatly concerned. He was hoping of course that the proposed experiment might release him into the pleasure of non-pain. However, he was not committed to such a release. He was hanging loose to it, not sure whether it would be good or not good.

He drove his small vehicle into the hills, away from the veterans' hospital and the new pain clinic. The car had been standing in the sun and the heat of the vehicle burned into his paining thigh. The heat became a counter-irritant, temporarily sedating the thrust of the pain, causing a glow to pass into him. As he drove he thought about the pain, as also the miracle that might come next week. At the same time his thoughts slipped back to the day of his wounding. He had not forgotten one detail of that day. The memory,

however, was neither angry nor bitter. He had realised—long ago—that pain had admitted him into another world, and he had a strong sense of gratitude for that. He had always felt sorry for people who were bored with life. For him the universe was filled with never-ending varieties of people, things, events. He never tired of seeing them, contemplating them, and in his own silences meditating upon them. There was nothing bovine in his ruminations. His eyes always gazed into a world which was never only what it seemed, which never seemed merely a repetition of things he had known or events he had experienced.

He thought of the hospital operating-room and the mad Irish major who had set him up for surgery. Even now he was reliving the moment when they had given him the anaesthetic, drawing the pain away, pushing him into a painless oblivion. He had often wondered where he had gone in those hours. It did not matter. The months and years that followed had been built upon those secret hours.

He remembered the first needle which had banished the pain. The little nurse had smiled conspiratorially, as though drugs were a mystery and the defeat of pain a victory of man against a severe Fate. He had not seen it that way. He had seen it as a momentary reprieve, a luxury time in which he could think afresh. He had not desired renewal of pain. Indeed he had often wept because of it, but one day he had accepted it, and the world into which it drew him.

In the hills he watched the trees drift by. He sped around the curves and bends until he found his own home. The woman who had shared his pain was waiting patiently.

‘What news?’ she asked eagerly. ‘Did they promise anything?’ Her eyes were gently sympathetic, hoping.

They shared the matter over their meal, looking down into long green woods. The trees slipped away from them into the valley.

At last she raised the question, not only out of her depths,

but also out of his. ‘What if it does not happen?’ She meant. ‘What if the pain is not banished?’

His answer was. ‘How can it possibly matter anything? Pain can be seen either as an affliction or a gift. It is no less a gift because one cannot see the reason for it. Where there is a clear conscience pain cannot and must not be seen as an affliction.’

They both left the matter there.

The day comes and the staff of the pain clinic gather around. The old soldier is prepared by the gowned nurses and the doctor looks thoughtful as they arrange the closed circuit television, showing the nerve enlarged upon the screen. Care has been taken to identify the position of the nerve which will be (hopefully) anaesthetised.

The staff is deeply interested. So is the man on the operating table. The first needle deadens the area into which the probe will take place. There is silence as the long needle probes towards the vital point. At that precise place the hypodermic discharges its pain killer. The veteran feels nothing though he sees all. His pain ceased with application of the local anaesthetic. After insertion and withdrawal of the needle he rests. Then he is taken home. Some days are required as a test. Later it will be seen whether the pain has been banished.

So they wait, curious to know whether the pain is now terminated. Nothing has changed. The warm-spirited wife of the veteran wonders about it all. Does this then mean banality? Has a crisis arisen only to dissolve into a nonentity? Is the thrilling promise of no pain to give way to the endless ache?

They think not. She thinks she loves him more than ever. There is nothing in him which is banal or mediocre. His world is not only interesting but stimulating. Pain often

draws him out to thought which might otherwise pass him by. She sees that pain of all kinds may enoble a person. She has known physical pain, and far beyond that, pain of the mind and the heart. He knows it has enriched and matured her, giving her great depth. Both know that continuous pain is not essential for full living. Both know of those whose anger is deep and bitter because of the pain endured. but then pain is no miscreant, within or of itself. It is the way men respond to it.

When the required days have passed and he visits the young medico he feels more for him than for himself. He sees the disappointment of the competent specialist. For himself he had been glad of the exercise. In a way he comforts the younger man and sympathises with his frustration. Brilliance cannot accomplish all things.

Faith and hope, then, will proceed to do their perpetual work, as also love will attend the season of pain. As he takes leave of the medical man and his staff, and as he winds his way in his small vehicle up the wooded slopes of the hills, he finds nothing has altered. Serenity has not been interrupted. He senses the purpose of it all, though he cannot rationalise the matter. Indeed he does not wish to verbalise anything, much less prove a point to himself.

He says to himself, 'Well, that is that!' This is not a dull acceptance, a deceiving of his inner spirit, or any such thing. It is rather a quiet act of faith, and knowing things as they really are. Some, by the young medico, have been relieved from pain. Pain, though it is in some instances a gift, in others is a mystery. Not all things are always in kilter. Yet out of killer they can prove valuable.

He doubts whether he can solve anything in this area, and so he prefers to live, pain or no pain. His memory slips over its beginnings and even to the time when it ceased temporarily. One day of course it will finally cease, and he thinks he knows what will be beyond that time.

He wonders how, even then, the human race will do without pain. He trusts it will not be drawn into dangerous hubris. Even as he contemplates this he knows it cannot happen.

Looking up, his eyes catch sight of his mate, his tenderhearted mate, and he smiles.

She also smiles back at him. They are both smiling.

NEW WINE FOR NEW MEN

This man Matthew. I guess you know his other name was Levi. That was, you might say, his religious name, signifying that he was born of priestly parents and designed, probably, for the church. It was almost certainly intended that he become a priest. More than this, of course, we cannot say.

What puzzles us is why he was living in Capernaum, the capital of Galilee, and why he had become so affluent. Doubtless the explanation may be a simple one such as Jerusalem was crowded with the priestly caste, and all would not have the opportunity to minister at the temple.

However, we are still faced with the problem of Matthew's virtual apostasy from Israel. You see, a tax gatherer was a quisling of sons. He was working for the occupation forces, the military might of Rome. Why then was this man from Jerusalem in Capernaum. and why virtually a money grubber living in the posh suburbs of the lakeside city?

The answers must be sought if we are to understand the man. I have undertaken the task of trying to empathise with him. Of course I will have to, from time to time, take poetic licence, or, as they say, use sanctified imagination. I have researched this man Matthew as far as I can. But his history was not written, as such: you have to tease out what you can from the fragments available. When now I write in the first person it is simply to identify with him as I have seen him. Of course, in some points I may be wrong. On the whole, however, I believe that I have caught the spirit of the man.

'In revealing some of the matters of my life I am trying to answer questions which may arise in your mind. One you might ask is. "How did it happen that you, a man called Levi, should be found in the city of Capernaum as a taxgatherer, indeed as the leading tax-gatherer?"

'That is a fair question. The reasons for my becoming a tax-gatherer are partly worthy, partly not so worthy'.

'I was brought up in the life and atmosphere of the temple. As a child I had certain impressions of the greatness and grandeur of that temple. The work on it had commenced even before I was born. As you know, it is a beautiful edifice, magnificent in its planning. Herod. I guess, had no love for us as Jews, but he felt it would keep us quiet. 'My parents were godly people, but then the life of the temple always left much to be desired. On the one hand there were religious zealots. always plotting against the authorities, and on the other hand the heavy legalists of the law. To give both these their due they seemed sincere enough. However unattractive they may have made our religion appear, they were nothing compared to the Sadducees.

'These heavy-handed persons were by no means religious. They were cynics in relation to the faith, but politicians in relation to the temple, which was their whole life. They plotted, planned and manoeuvred. As a small child I was impressed by their aristocratic ways, their grave looks, their religious expressions in worship. They only seemed to be outdone in this by the Pharisees.

'There, if you like, was a group of men who exercised unusual piety. They dressed, they walked, they talked—all in holy and devotional style. I was deeply impressed by them. Had I never been awakened to what people are—themselves included—I might not have taken on the livelihood of a tax-gatherer.

'As I grew older I began to be disillusioned. I was on the

inside of the ecclesiastical operation. I can remember the shock that came to me when I found out that the temple, for the Sadducees, was their most lucrative source of business. Religion, to put it mildly, was big business. If you had talked to me in those days I would have said that I gave away religion because it was commercialised. Now I am not so sure. In fact I believe I gave it away because I just had other plans than living my life for God. I used the heavy, legalism of the Pharisees, scribes and lawyers as one excuse, and the commercial religious rackets of the Sadducees as another.

‘Without doubt life has to be filled with something, and I wanted that something. I wanted it badly and I was going to get it. Of course when they expect you to go into the church then you get your back up and reject the things of your background even more. So I set out to make money and become rich.

‘I will not bore you with the score of my life, the events which brought me to Galilee and into the much—despised but greatly envied occupation of tax-gatherer. You will know that it is regarded as traitorous to one’s own people and country. You will also have seen that tax-gatherers bleed their customers to gross their riches. All of this I used to do.

‘One day the Nazarene came to Capernaum. This was in the early days. You can imagine what they said about him, by contrast with what he actually said and did. I used to look for myself and think for myself, but nothing equalled the occasion when we went up on to the Mount outside of Capernaum, or, as they sometimes say. “The Plain on the Hill”. On that level spot where crowds were able to gather, he gave us that unforgettable sermon.

‘Perhaps you have read my account of the ministry, death, resurrection and teaching of Jesus. In writing it I checked out with others, especially for details of events before I joined up with his team of followers and enthusiasts

In that account you will see how much space I give to the teaching we heard that day.

‘Preach! Could that man preach! Mind you, not after the dry, scholastic style of some of our trained preachers, but fresh, down-to-earth, just where most of us are. Given he was unorthodox in his approach and teaching methods, he was by no means heretical in his teaching. He drew things out of our Law of Moses that few had seen that way before.

‘I mustn’t ramble on, for I have many things to tell you. Most of all you must remember I was very cynical of religion. I told myself I had seen no good come of it. I had long ago rationalised my departure from the faith as wholly justified by what I had seen. Heavy legalism, ecclesiastical commercialism—these things had put me off. For this reason I was not prepared to set much store by the Nazarene. Doubtless he was a charlatan of sorts. There had to be money in it.

‘At the same time I was anxious. Success in business often impels you to seek a different kind of satisfaction. I had a faint feeling that this, possibly, was what might happen if I heard the Nazarene, and I was correct, but then what happened was different from what I anticipated and far more demanding than I would ever have dreamed.

‘You see, when he commenced, he spoke with such authority that I was compelled to listen. I knew immediately that this man was no charlatan, no money-grubber, no reputation-seeker. His words were clear, strong and penetrating. I saw others wince from time to time, but then I winced no less than they. At the same time there was nothing of accusation in his voice, nothing which was harsh.

‘When he commenced his, “Blessed are they...” I was somewhat alarmed. He spoke of the meek, the poor, the pure in heart, and of those hungering after righteousness. Each one thudded home to me because my state tallied with none of these things. Later, when thinking over his words. I

realised that in fact he had shown me my own poverty of being, my spiritual failure, my need of true righteousness.

“It was when he came to the heart of his message that I was stunned. I could scarcely believe my ears when I heard him say, “Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.” I realised he had seen through the professional religionists. When he spoke of hypocrisy in alms giving and prayer making then I knew that he knew what it was all about. He had seen through the sham of untrue practice. I rejoiced at that. In fact I glowed.

The glow soon left me. That Man quickly got to the bone. He quietly and firmly exposed the inner thought-life of men, especially their lustful fantasies. Nothing was said in a hypercritical or judgemental way, but it hurt for all that. When he finished that part of his address you could get an image of true married and family life and it was very pure, very beautiful.

‘He talked about us tax-gatherers of course. In fact preachers seldom leave us out, but he simply pointed out that we were human. We too loved our own, but of course love had to be even more than that.

‘What I found most confronting was his talk about money and riches. I felt exposed there. He spoke of laying up riches on earth and the way they corrupt. He spoke about that corruption which they bring to man’s spirit. To tell the truth I burned with shame, which is rarely the case with my sort.

‘The alternative he gave to money-grubbing and money storing was a quiet dependence upon God. Now this is where he got to me, in fact this is where he really gripped me—speaking of the Father. The Father! I had never heard a man handle that word like him. No, sir. He spoke as though he were uniquely the Son of that Father. Later, of course, I came to understand that he is just that. Anyway

spoke so richly and convincingly of this dependence, that suddenly I wanted to be rid of my wealth so that I could walk the simple way.

‘Oh, I could go on and on. I have never ceased to weigh up those words he gave out that day. Each is like a jewel, unique in itself and valuable for its own size. However would I have been able to record them in my account unless they had burned into my mind and my heart? I believe I record them almost wholly as they were spoken.

‘The closing words of that unforgettable sermon also deeply imprinted themselves upon me. He pictured each man as a house. One house was as beautiful and strong as another. However one was built on sand, and when adverse conditions came—such as storm, rain and flood—the house collapsed. Another, built on solid rock, was unmoved by similar crises. It remained impregnable. All had heard the Nazarene speak, but he likened the home on sand to the person who had heard the message given but had not taken it to heart and obeyed it. The house on the rock was likened to the man who, having heard Messiah’s words, obeyed, living them out in life. Only he would remain impregnable.

‘I was left in a dilemma. Of course I agreed with all that he said. It was unmistakably true. The man himself was genuine. My decision was forced: would I build on sand, or on the rock? In life one builds the best one can, with an eye to the future. I am not ashamed to say that I was close to tears as I returned to my beautiful home, up there on the most expensive and snobbish lots on Capernaum Heights. Somehow, strangely enough, everything that I owned there seemed as nothing.

‘Slowly I was being polarised. A decision was being precipitated. Little did I realise how soon and how strangely events would happen which would alter my entire life.’

'I have recorded very briefly in my writings the story of a man who was paralysed but then healed by Jesus. Most of us in Capernaum were familiar with the person and knew that his history was a rather sad one. When Jesus came to Capernaum things always moved swiftly and no less on the occasion I am talking about. To be brief, Jesus healed this man. Healed him, you may say, both outwardly and inwardly, both in body and mind.

'I remember the event very clearly. I had been working in my business on that morning, assessing the goods as people brought them through the Roman check-point. I assessed the value of them, wrote out the amounts I was charging, and gave them their receipts. To tell the truth I didn't have much heart for the business. Somehow since the day of The Sermon, all that kind of interest had faded. Indeed the heart had gone out of the whole matter. I was surprised at how listless and apathetic I had become towards money. The words of the Man kept coming to me as I scribbled the tax accounts.

'Early in the day I had seen the folk hastening to a certain house. They reminded me grimly of the early days of my life when I had reacted so strongly to religion. They were men of the old school—scribes, Pharisees, lawyers—and some of them even carried their prayer mats, their writing tablets, and the like. They seemed intent upon business, and, on asking I discovered they were out to examine the Nazarene.

'I shan't spend time telling you the story in detail. All I know is that I heard, that morning, but far in the distance, cries which indicated a great disturbance. Strictly speaking it was not a disturbance. It was praise of an unusual kind, as I soon was to see.

'Down the road, past my toll house, carrying a bed on his head, running, jumping, laughing and shouting, was the man who had formerly been paralysed. I didn't recognise him at first, but from his cries of praise I realised he was

indeed the one I had often seen, lying paralysed, on his bed. His crying and his shouting quickly informed me that a great miracle had happened.

'If that were not enough, others who followed him down the road were recounting the story with great gusto. Some of them were shouting loudly as though the event were so great that they would never be able to forget it. How wonderful!

'Then to my amazement the Nazarene himself came up to my tax-collector's stall, looked at me a moment, smiled quietly and said, "Follow me." Just that! No other word, just "Follow me."

'So I followed him.

'You may wonder how it was I could, in a moment, make that great decision. The simple answer is that I had for some time been dissatisfied with myself, my occupation as a taxgatherer, and in fact my whole way of life. I had become quite hungry and thirsty for the good things of God which I had seen in Jesus, and I looked for the opportunity to exchange this new way of life for the old life I had known.

'I cannot describe to you the enormous relief I felt. In fact it was like waves of joy and peace flowing over me. I felt the former tension I had known suddenly lessen. Indeed it wholly disappeared. Tranquillity of mind and heart was something I had not anticipated, but it came, and I was deeply grateful.

'And so I could go on, describing the great event. I could tell how I knew my sins to have been forgiven, as did that former paralytic. Nevertheless this is not the story I wish to tell, wonderful as it is. I want to tell you about the event of my testimony dinner which I arranged. It was to be my opportunity to tell others of what Jesus had done for me. More, it was an opportunity for them to meet my new Master and Teacher.

'I must not go into all the details of the physical arrangements. The tables groaned with food and drink. The

amenities for socialising were not lacking. The guests knew themselves to be treated well in welcome, courtesies, and feasting. I made sure of that.

'Jesus and his disciples arrived and they were bright and merry enough about it all. They appreciated the good things of life, as I had further occasion to discover in later times. In any case they fitted into the events of the feast, relaxed, reclined, and eating the good things before them.

'This, sadly enough, was not the case with the Pharisees and their scribes. Moved as they had been by the healing of the paralysed man, they had still quickly returned to their former mode of life. This, as you may know, was one of criticising all but themselves. They were quite sectarian in their approach, imagining that only they had the truth. You could sense their disapproval from the beginning, and you wondered why they had come to view the occasion and be spectators at the meal.

You will know that in our Eastern culture almost anyone is permitted to be a spectator at the social events of celebration such as birth, marriage, and death, and of course, occasions such as the one I am describing. However it is quite ungracious of such spectators to be critics of these events, especially as mine was virtually a thanksgiving to God for return to Him and my nation's true way of life.

'They were not simply quietly unapproving. They were bitterly critical. In fact they attacked Jesus himself. It was as though they had forgotten that the Creator has placed many good things in this world so that we may enjoy them. In this case my old friends and acquaintances were doing just that—enjoying the good things—and so were the disciples and Jesus.

'The more we showed our joy, freedom, and appreciation, the more the Pharisees and the scribes reacted. They had certainly missed the true spirit of the occasion. The revelling was not merely in food and drink. It was the con-

viviality of liberation, the joy of freedom, the ecstasy of release.

'They missed the point. Finally, unable to bear it any longer, they approached Jesus. To be truthful they first attacked the disciples. "Why," they asked, "does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?" Perhaps they were reluctant to have an encounter with Jesus themselves, but he discerned what they were about and took them up on their point. He told them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

'You will of course know that in our culture the terms *tax-gatherers* and *sinners* are much the same. We are bundled together. "Sinners" are folk who are generally notorious in their evil. They, with tax-gatherers, are denied the grace of the sacrifices and must live with their unrelieved consciences. Hence Jesus could rightly call such "sick". Such needed a doctor. This is without doubt.

'I must say the answer was superb. I doubt whether many of the Pharisees and their scribes saw the twinkle in his eyes and the slight smile on his lips when he spoke about "the righteous". They seemed to accept humourlessly that they were these, and, as such, needed no repentance. You could not say they were given to much humour, especially the fine irony in Jesus' words.

'They were out to press their point. "What," they asked, "what of John the Baptist and his disciples? Do they not fast often, and continually offer prayers?" They knew of course that John claimed to be linked with Jesus and his movement.

'That was not all. "We," said the Pharisees, "we and our disciples also fast and pray."

'Their hands gestured in disgust, sweeping around the scene. I must confess that the scene was one of joyous exuberance, delight, exhilaration. These friends of mine were

really jubilant. Of course, that really distressed our friends of the law. They believed that real religiosity is a thing of deep seriousness. It is an experience of continual gravity. It has little to do with joy or lightheartedness,

‘Jesus understood our joy. It was not at all superficial. It was the joy of release. It was born of the new knowledge and experience that God loves us. Prior to Jesus’ coming God had seemed primarily judgemental, even vengeful. I guess that when you look at Him—so to speak—through a heavy conscience, you fail to see Him clearly. The image is blurred and even distorted. To see Him as loving and forgiving—why, this is an exhilarating experience. Indeed—to tell the truth—we were more than a little intoxicated with joy. The sheer relief of sins forgiven and of acceptance with God is what few—if any—tax-gatherers and such sinners expect to experience. I tell you we were filled with great joy.

‘This is why Jesus gave the answer he did. He said, “(‘an the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.’) Jesus was referring to himself as the bridegroom—both the object and provider of joy. And why not? We revelled in his presence. We were joyful in his love. We had entered into a whole new world of experience. Repentance, instead of being a crushing experience, was one which had released us into unbelievable joy.

‘Jesus then asked them whether they would sew new cloth into an old garment. Obviously not. The new was stronger than the old and would make the situation worse. Likewise he asked them whether they would put fresh grapejuice into old leather flagons. The last question especially was most apt because new wine ferments powerfully. It pushes, thrusts and throbs away at the leather. The leather has to be new and tough, otherwise it cannot take the strain. By the time the fluid has matured there is only enough strength in

the leather to contain the now quiescent wine. That old flask cannot stand the pushing and pounding of a fresh infilling.

“‘Likewise.’ Jesus was saying, “the old forms of religious faith cannot contain this new and joyous ferment of repentance, forgiveness and spiritual renewal.”

‘How right he was. The traditionalists were close to horrified by this new joy, this happy release. Had they then not known it.?’

‘I saw them depart from the feast that night, shaking their heads, puzzled, and—in some cases—even wistful. I knew they could see the hand of God in my own change of life and the release of my colleagues, but somehow it just seemed wrong to them. They lacked reassuring precedents by which to assess the situation.

‘No matter: we rejoiced while the Bridegroom was with us. The time came, quickly enough, when he was taken away and indeed, as he had said, we mourned deeply. We had no heart, or stomach, for food. We wept bitterly in fact, and had we not had the memory of joy we would have been wholly undone. In this matter our Master proved to be a prophet.

‘When the feast closed that night and the guests were gone I realised that our Lord had refused to let the critics spoil the meal and the rejoicing. I cannot remember—prior to that evening—being filled with such serenity, although the meal had ended and the guests had departed. Before meeting him, I had always felt tired, miserable, empty, and often cheated, after such a feast.

‘Now there was just a steady, even flow of quietness and peace. Tonight was no pay-off to a jaded stomach and mind, but a wholly new and different happening. This night my friends had truly seen my Master, Jesus, as he really is. They too had come to know what lay in him.

‘Tomorrow I would bid farewell to them, but then who could know but shortly many would also follow him?’

Epilogue

“Those days seem far away now. Years have passed and much has happened, both to my friends and me. I could spend many hours reminiscing and writing of the events of a busy and fruitful life. I could tell you how I wrote the great Gospel of Jesus, the good news of his birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection.

‘Yet this is not my aim. I have to admit that I lost heart—with all of my brethren—in those last hours of the Cross. All seemed finished. Everything was on the minor note of the forlorn. The Resurrection, whilst it revived me, still surprised and puzzled us all.

‘It was the Day of Pentecost, with the coming of the Spirit, that made it all so clear to me. Then explanation, as such, passed into revelation, and revelation gripped my soul. My whole being suddenly, and deeply, understood. I then knew what we were to do. I have recorded this remarkable commission in the last verses of my Gospel account.

‘These things I have been doing, as the years have passed by, and doing them in strange lands and various cultures.

‘I wish—at the last—to record the unchanging joy I have known down through all these years. I have seen and heard many strange and wonderful things. One thing, however, I shall not forget.

‘It is the day when he came walking, down to my tax gatherer’s booth, looked me in the eye, and said in wonderful kindness.

“Come! follow me!”

THE LOVE FEAST

He saw them walk up the aisle between the rows of beds, making their way towards him. In the two years he had known Rod he had never ceased to be fascinated by the strong face, the thrust-out jaw, the intense eyes. Rod was always chewing the cud of his thoughts, and what he ruminated he never revealed. He was building up a store of his own wisdom but he wasn’t sharing it with others. Next to him, and carrying something under a cloth, was young Bobby. He hid nothing. He was always open. He would laugh at the drop of the hat, but then he was a bit nervous with it, too. Rod—he kept himself in check always. Now they were nearly up to his bed.

They both belonged to his section of the Signals platoon. They had laid cable with him, under his orders. They gave the rough obedience which troops grant to their sergeant, but no more; they gave nothing of themselves. They were suspicious of authority, keeping their own Aussie counsel, jealous of their independence. They had stuck with him closely in the hard days, obeying his orders because they respected him, but at the same time covering up any affection they might have had. Now, as they walked, he could see the nervousness of them both. The hospital—this prisoner of war hospital—was something difficult to cope with. The sobs and sounds of the wounded and the sick made them uneasy. It was not their territory. They found it emotionally difficult; he could see that.

They called him ‘Carney’ or ‘Carnie’, adding the ‘-ie’ ending which all Australians do with half-affection, half embarrassment. A childish custom really, but then maybe

more childlike than childish. He had accepted that. Sometimes they just called him 'Sarge'. They gave him a rough greeting, and awkwardly Bobby put the covered object into his lap.

'Some of the fellers got together,' he said. 'They thought you'd like a change from rice.'

He felt helpless and did not know what to do. He could have lifted the cover off the tray and looked at what they had brought him, but as yet he could make no move. Suddenly he too was embarrassed. In a way he had lived in his own world. When it came to signals work such as laying of lines, soldering, setting up phones, and connecting exchanges, there was no worry. He had learned to do those things. When it came to relationships, though, he had a problem. It was the problem of his faith-life. He didn't like the word 'religious', but that is the word that would have been in Rod's mind and Bobby's thinking. To him faith was life, and to them it was religious. He had always thought that a pity and a misunderstanding. So he knew the chasm that was between them, and he often sighed about it.

For their part they held nothing against him. That was how he was and they accepted it: but that was how they weren't and it was he who would have to cope with that. Now they were saying something to him through this gift.

Rod said, 'Scurry got it together. We all did a bit of scrounging, but in any case we brought things in from outside.'

He could imagine them in the hours of silence that followed the capitulation to the Japanese. They had been in and out of those suburban houses scattered around Singapore city. They had ferreted out tins of food, bottles of drink, and books to read. Some of them had gone for the bigger things like money in safes, and typewriters in the stores. His men weren't into that kind of thinking. They had simply been on for survival.

'Scuffy's a good cook,' Bobby said. Then he looked at his sergeant. 'Sorry about that leg.' His eyes roved sympathetically up and down the extension, the sling, and the pulleys that allowed the fractured leg to be adjusted. Inside he was cursing hard, but he kept his words to himself.

Paul could see they were waiting for him to lift the cloth, but he had to do something before that. 'I've been wanting to thank you. Rod. I was finished until you came along.' He grinned ruefully. 'Thought nobody would come. Thought you had all cleared off.'

Rod's jaw set hard again as though snapped into place. 'We were around,' he said, 'but they kept us off. It would have been suicide to come in. Then they went, so we came back.'

The injured man remembered the tender way in which they had picked him up. Rod had heaved him up on to his shoulders and Scuffy had held his legs, especially the smashed one. It must have been dripping with the blood. They had put him in ute. Then they had made the long, bumpy ride to the improvised hospital.

'I kept wondering what had happened to you,' Paul said. He felt the emotion mounting inside. 'I wanted to be out there with you.'

Rod mumbled something and then gestured with a thumb towards the tray. 'Have a look. Carney.'

Carney had a look. He lifted the cover. What should have been a thrill was a shaft of pain, hitting his heart and impacting his gut. What he saw was unbelievable. It was a meal, home fashion, Aussie fashion, with some army touch about it. The main thing he noticed was that there was no tacky rice'.

No tacky rice! In a flash his mind was away, and although his thoughts took only a moment to the watchers, eager to know Carney's reactions, they were like an endless dream to the wounded soldier. He was back in the early days when he

was still trying to understand his father. He was seated at the table with his eight brothers and sisters, and Dadda was holding forth on the virtues of rice, especially unpolished rice—or, as they called it, 'brown rice'. Dadda was on one of his health kicks. He had them every so often, and they had to eat rice, the whole eleven of them, including Mumma and Dadda. The others had made it, but he hadn't. He could still feel the stuff choking him in the throat, and his father's eagle eye on him. He had been the lone rebel against flourishing health, but that day a hatred of rice had been born. Here, in the prison camp, it was almost only rice, and the cooks hadn't learned how to cook it the proper way. So his gorge had risen against the tacky stuff. Inside, his stomach had contracted but he had been unable to beat the fixation.

That wasn't all that flashed into his mind. He thought about the circumstances and people in the hospital. For example, there were the dysentery cases. They were pathetic. They cried with the pain and some of them just gave up and died. He could understand that because they had been shocked by defeat. A hideous new world had opened up to them where the East had overcome the West. The brave Aussie myth had been exploded. Incarceration had wounded them more deeply than explosives, so they keeled over and died. They gave up the ghost. They flaked out. What frustrated him was the tomato soup they left in their enamel plates, or in their pannikins. His whole being cried out for tomato soup and they turned their eyes from it—some of them—and quietly died.

Rod said, 'Aren't you going to eat it?' Although his thoughts had only taken a splinter of time, it seemed long to his two fellow soldiers. Their eyes were on him, analysing his reaction. But that was something they could never know. He could never tell them. That was because he kept the thoughts dammed up somewhere way back in his mind,

even though they came flooding like a torrent. Instead he said. 'Incredible! Unbelievable!'

They grinned at that. 'Thought you would like it.' Even Rod was a bit smug. 'No tacky rice,' he said. There was pride in his jutting jaw. 'No tacky rice,' he agreed warmly.

There was a bowl of tomato soup. There were slices of bread. On the main plate there were vegetables that had been cooked, some of them local and others out of tins. There was the old Army M. & V. (meat and vegetables), some camp pie which had been cooked, and some ham which was cool and sliced. In another bowl there were peaches and cream, and on its own a slice of fruit cake. Somebody had put salt and pepper shakers, and there were a knife, a fork and a spoon. The whole thing was laid out as though a chef had set it. It was neat, tidy and incredibly beautiful.

When he stared at them they saw the tears in his eyes. That was a bit much for Rod. 'We have to be going,' he muttered. 'The reliefs just said to give you their love. We'll be back.'

'Yeah,' Bobby said, 'we'll be back.' He looked at the tray wonderingly, enviously. He leaned over and whispered in Carney's ear. 'This time, don't give none of it away. The reliefs said it is just for you.'

Rod grunted before they left. 'You need all that food. You're getting skinny.' Well, he was skinny. He had lost about five stone in six weeks, what with the early starving and then the loss of blood, and after that the enteritis. Also he had had a bout of dengue fever.

He barely kept back the tears until they had gone. Even then he held on to them. The orderlies were crowding around, and some of the surgical patients were looking with stunned amazement.

'What a thing!' the ward sergeant said. 'What a thing!'

It was a thing, all right. You couldn't say otherwise. The sergeant was a good fellow. 'You'd better get stuck into it. Paul. It's what you've needed. Especially since you can't come at rice.'

Paul nodded. It was true he couldn't come at rice. All these weeks of rice he had dreamed about food like this. One night he had actually dreamed up a plate of steak and eggs, but it had disappeared before he could get to it. Most of his dreaming was daydreaming—about food.

It was then that the tears came. They came in a flood. In fact they came as a strong spate, spilling out of his eyes, running down his nose and cheeks and dripping on to the food. At first it was only the tears, but then the sobs began. They were not quiet or partly stifled sobs. They were fearful sobs, great racking things that shook his body and set the leg throbbing again with pain. Yet the pain was nothing to the dry racking of his chest, the shaking of his inner foundations. What was happening terrified him. Great oceans of emotions were rising and finding their way out into the brilliant light of day, it seemed as though years of stifled feeling, unexpressed thought, unfulfilled yearning were getting free in a wild untempered storm. Spasms shook him fear fully.

One of the orderlies went to fetch a screen, but the ward surgeon stopped him. 'Let him be,' he said. 'It'll do us all good.' He stared at the weeping soldier. 'It'll act as a catharsis.' When the orderly looked puzzled, he grinned and added. 'An emotional enema.' The orderly grinned with him.

He could still hear Bobby and Rod telling him to eat the food, but he couldn't do it. He was surprised by his own body, which had taken over. He had lost control of it. The spasms had increased, and there seemed to be no end to the tears. Somewhere at the back of his mind he was under standing what it was all about. There had been weeks of

cable-laying. Night and day they had been on the move. They had never been sure whether they might be ambushed or not. There hadn't been time even to wash, and certainly not to shave. He had surprised himself with a bushy red beard which had contrasted with his own fair hair. They had discarded their old clothes altogether and put on new ones. Then when the oil wells had been bombed they had put up with the grime. Their clothes were black. Only the whites of the eyes showed up through the soot. For the rest they were anonymous creatures, compulsively laying line, repairing shredded cable, contacting the units on their complex.

Even so he knew this wasn't the major factor in his present distress. It went back further, right to the day of enlistment, the night when they had picked up the fact that he was 'one of those': that is to say, not one of them. They noted the differences but said little. They took no adverse action except to try to shock him with words and jokes and actions. After a time they left him to what he was and communicated on normal levels. They let him be the human he was. He had appreciated that. Even so he knew men moved in different kingdoms of living. All moved in one kingdom—the kingdom of man—but in a sense there was another kingdom, and it was a hidden one. In fact there was a third kingdom which was one he would never enter.

Something was filtering through to him. He had seen the look in Rod's eyes and it had been no different with Bobby. They had shown respect and affection. That was as far as they would go. For himself, he had been brought up in a hard school of doctrine. All men were evil, totally evil. They were either in the true kingdom or outside it, and all outside was hopeless and even depraved. From as far back as he could remember the tension had always been there. It had been there at school, and in the city when he began working in the Depression years. He always felt the eyes of others on him. He could not remember a time when he had been free.

of that pressure. It had been the same when lie had gone jackerooing. The line of division was always there.

The strange thing was that he had never seen a human being quite in the light of his spiritual abstractions. He couldn't remember ever having hated a person. Often his sense of justice had been stirred at blatant injustice, but he had not hated the persons involved. Besides, he had an irrepressible sense of humour. The tension had always seemed less when he had joked. He felt some of them being drawn to him in his fun. Even so the tension had remained. In a curious way the action in war had released something of that tension. The men had looked to him for leadership. There was a touch of humour too when the bombs began to drop and they would race for the slit trenches. The team would crowd into his trench.

'You'll be looked after, Carney they would say, we're in with you!' They had been more than half serious.

Of course there had been other like himself, men had faith, but one by one they had been drafted out to other sections or units. That had not worried him. It was the deeper problem that he puzzled over; the divisions between humans. He had not wanted to be lonely, to be cut off. True, he hadn't wanted to participate in some of their things, but there was plenty he could share with them. He did, as far as he was permitted. However, each of the men seemed to reach a stage in this, beyond which they would not go. It was an automatic cut-out point. That was when the two kingdoms were clearly marked.

Even that wasn't his problem. Somehow he had always wanted to help. On rare occasions he had helped. They had come to his tent to yarn, especially the husbands who did not know how to handle marriage. He wasn't married himself, but they seemed to think he understood things. It was hard when he couldn't help. Some of the letters the wives wrote were beyond him. His trouble was he felt too

deeply. He sensed the despair in most of the fighting men. Some had underlying terror that never let them enjoy life. He hated to see them go off to the red-light area. He had walked through it once or twice and it repelled him. He remembered Lenny coming back from his first encounter and sobbing his heart out. He hadn't known men could feel like that. It was the emptiness which had appalled him.

As he remembered these things, one of the orderlies brought him a drink of water. But he waved it away. He was still shaking with the sobs. His body seemed to be in a fever, yet he knew it was no sickness. His mind was like a kaleidoscope. Pictures were flashing on and off, and they were all mixed. He saw the signals team in action, working like one fine, tensile body. The co-ordination was superb, the action in genuine harmony. Occasionally the section commander would volunteer an amateur remark and they would work on, ignoring him. These were the moments when the division seemed dissolved and he was one with them. He sensed the innate drive for oneness. For the time it would be good: after the action the sense of difference returned. The team became a group of amiable and tolerant aliens. He was still outside.

The curious thing was that they did not want him to change. Once or twice he had ventured an artificial gesture or two which seemed to make him one with them, part of their kingdom, and they had been disturbed. He had been forced to withdraw. He had gradually come to see that they wanted him to keep his integrity and remain the way he was.

The day he was wounded he had thought, 'They will know now that I am not weak, that I don't lack in that area.' After a time he knew they had always thought that, anyway. Courageous action had added nothing to their assessment of him. They had never misread him. Even so they had not ac-

cepted him; he was not part of them. They knew a different life. But then he had always known a different life too. From as far back as he could remember, the difference had been there. It had even been in his family. Was this what the prophets had known? Had they had to live with that difference until the end?

Suddenly he knew why he had wept. It was true that nervous tension had built up, that being wounded in the charge on the Jap machine-gun nest had demanded its toll, and lying alone in Japanese territory with snipers in the trees had been an emotional drain. Put all things together—weeks of no sleep, incessant machine-gunfire from the Zeroes above, the bombing and shelling, and the days of pain in hospital—it had all contributed. But what had torn him about, not only now but in all the years of his life, was having to see man as hopeless, lost and depraved. He knew men's fears, their puzzlement, their despair. Some were even nihilistic: they had no goal and no purpose and were cynical about those who did. Some were brutalised and dehumanised, and it all lay heavily upon him.

Into all this concealed vortex of disappointment and bewilderment had come a sudden revelation. He could see Rod, lantern-jawed and stoical, trying to conceal his emotion but showing it in his eyes—a genuine and deep affection for his N.C.O. mate. Bobby had been more guileless. His esteem had shone out. Both of them had watched him eagerly as he lifted the cloth from the tray. They had eagerly, even earnestly sought out his response. He had seen the relief in their eyes at his astonishment. His tears had gratified them too, although they had been unable to handle them. Underneath it all, in a subconscious way, he had realised that they loved him, that they were one with him. But they dared not articulate this, at least, not in any way than by a tray of special food.

He thought about the food and what it would have meant

to them to collect it. They would have liked to have it, too. Every one in the ward would have liked it, except the fainthearted dysentery patients, and even some of them were looking longingly.

In a moment his tears were gone. The sobs ceased to rack him. The emotion had subsided. The vast oceans of feeling were placid and serene. His own spirit was tranquil. The ward surgeon reached him and nodded. He laid a gentle hand on his pulse, nodded again, and was gone.

'That's the image,' he said suddenly to himself. A vast revelation had come to him. All men were not bad. Rather, men were not all bad. In Rod and Bobby and their mates —his mates—he had suddenly seen the gold of the original image. It was brilliant: it was beautiful. A flash of it and then it was gone, but enough to last him for a lifetime. In some sense the old division was there, but in another way it wasn't. Essentially man is not divided from man. Separation is not inevitable. Where it exists it is a matter of will.

He could remember clearly Rod and Bobby looking back at him, smiling and partly apprehensive. They had been trying to get a message through. That was an eternity ago: at least it seemed so. The message had come through. He could see the gold of the image like a sudden flash of glory. He wanted to shout after them, or get an orderly to bring them back, but he desisted. Somehow he knew that somehow they knew. Maybe his silent tears had shown them, in any case the big event had happened.

After a time he took up the knife and the fork. Then he put them down for the spoon. He would start with the tomato soup. He had one eye on the soup and one on the meat and vegetables. It was like being in the middle of a dream. A sensitive orderly brought the screen and covered him and the food from the watching eyes. It was kinder to do that than to leave them exposed.

In his private tent—so to speak—the warm feeling of

human mateship stole across the wounded man. He was beginning to realise what being a human is all about. He thought the tomato soup was like the nectar of the gods, but his eye was also on the peaches and cream.

**IN SURRENDER,
TRUE POSSESSION**

Surrendering we gain
What we dared not lose.
In the giving we receive back
Not the thing we had
But what we never did possess
And now we have, never to be lost
For it is always given:
Given for always.

Holding, we lose the idol.
The glamour dies, the enchanted
Beauty of being dissolves
In the grey-wraith of dawn.
The dying is to signify death
Of all the idols: the gleam
Dulls to sullen apprehension
That the heart beating pleasure
Is as a rotting entity. The gleam
Of its old gold is bare brass
Winking in the ghost-sun
Of old, but treacherous days.

Giving, we find the hands
Warm with divinity.
The gentle pulse quickens
As the new fine throb
Awakens as a dawning love
Tremors with fresh light.

The silver incandescence,
Reality pulsating of new birth.
Freely given, freely give:
For giving makes the freedom
To freely give.

So was it with a Cross, a low suffering,
A high way of love. Then the silence
In the contemplative grave.
After the grave the awakening,
The burst seal of death, tomb-triumph,
Dawn-breaking, the fluted echo
Of the high victory. In ascension
The acceptance is attested.
The Given is received back by the Giver.

Cross victory. Resurrection victory,
And ascension triumph earn the giving
Of the giving Spirit. Poured out
He flows into receiving wills
So hearts flood full with love and grace.
So begins the human round of giving
Which brings the receiving and so the giving,
Until the giving is learned,
Becoming part of the nature redeemed.
It is new sons becoming like eternal Father
In the fellowship of the Elder Brother.

Surrendering we gain
What we dared not lose;
But in the gaining the trifles lost
Are gladly lost: the true gaining
Is the giving.

THE WOMAN WHO WAS WEAK

As soon as you entered that place you felt it: felt the atmosphere. If you looked around you could see two kinds of persons. You could tell which group they belonged to by the look in their eyes. I suppose most of us have long ago learned to detect what is curiosity, and what is real enmity. Some are curious, waiting for a man to prove himself, but others have the look which says, 'You can never prove yourself.'

They were there, all right. those two groups. Not all of the first group, the friendly group, were altogether sure of the man who sat on the small raised dais. He sat cross-legged, looking down at his audience, or, as we should say, congregation. Congregation was a great word for these Jews, for synagogue means 'the gathered together'. The wider word was the *qahal*. the congregation of the people. They were watching Jesus, some friendly, some not friendly. The latter had looks of suspicion, glances of distrust. In fact the report that was given was that they were adversaries. They opposed this man who was teaching them.

When it came to teaching he was surely a teacher of unusual character. Long ago they had said of him. 'He speaks with authority and not as the scribes!' That was curious, of course, because the scribes were trained men, fine academics. Often they were a little removed from the run-of the mill members of the congregation. However, they knew their subject. That was why they were listening intently, not wanting to miss what he said. If possible they would catch him with his own words. If not with words, then they would catch him with his acts.

That moment seemed to have arrived. The place was the synagogue, the day was the Sabbath, the atmosphere was heavily legalistic. None could be allowed to make any kind of move or action which would even appear to be like work. To break the Sabbath would be an horrific thing. The *status quo* of the law had to be maintained—whatever.

The teaching went on. And gripping it must have been, for rarely did a man speak with such authority, and authority is one of the world's rarest commodities. Of domination there is plenty: of authority there is very little. Suddenly he stopped teaching.

They followed the gaze of his eyes. This gaze rested upon a sad case of deformed humanity. You wondered, as you looked, whether this woman dared often to come to the synagogue. Perhaps in her pitiful condition she came just to be near people, and to draw comfort, socially, from their presence. Was that not the idea, that all were sons and daughters of old Father Abraham? Was this not, in a way, the family of God? Here you would have not only pity, but love.

You might have said she was drooped, from the waist forward. Her head was down, her arms hanging, pitifully unable to straighten up. The word *jack-knifed* would describe her condition. It was the hopeless state of her which kept you from looking at her. You wanted to look away, anywhere. You wanted to be rid of the uneasiness that attends all human deformity. If you had tried you could have imagined her as an undrooped, not jack-knifed, not sadly ridiculous, but fine upstanding woman. But then you had to work hard, in your mind, to see her in this state.

Most in the synagogue knew her, even if she did not often come on the Sabbath day. Eighteen years before, a crisis had taken place, and her normal state was changed. The natural power of her humanity had been invaded. Her strength had been taken from her, and she had dropped,

been suddenly, horribly jack-knifed. *Spondylitis deformans*, the sickness would be called today.

She would not forget the crisis which had brought it upon her. How Satan and his evil powers hate the beauty of God's creation! How they despise the beauty of man, and the glory of his original uprightness! 'Thou hast made man upright,' said the writer of Ecclesiastes. Noble is a man when he walks upright, and once this woman had walked upright. Now, to her, that must have seemed in all wistfulness an old dream, good, in memory, but at the same time somewhat mocking.

The gospeller describes her as 'having had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years'. When you look closely at the text it is not easy to discover precisely what had happened. That she was weak, and weak in all those eighteen years, is not in doubt. There is more than a hint from the tenses that the crisis which brought on this weakness had happened just at the beginning of those eighteen years. That crisis must have been terrifying. Anyone who has been strong, vibrant, and vital, and has suddenly lost his powers through a stroke, or some other quickly-working disease, will know the kind of horror she must have experienced.

In her case it had been a spirit, that is to say, some demonic form of attack. Why it came we do not know. Nor are we to speculate that it was from special sin, or some unusual act of evil on her part. Demonic powers will attack wherever they can. As we said before, they hate the beauty of God's creation. They delight in distorting true character and personality.

What does come through in the text, however, is that whether she was constantly attended by a spirit of infirmity or not, she had always suffered from that initial crisis. In eighteen years she had not been able to live as a normal person. It takes little imagination to follow her in her sense of horror, shame and humiliation, as well as the personal physical suffering which must have been hers. it would have

been torture for her to imagine herself upstanding and free again.

She was certainly very weak. Weakness is something we all know a lot about. We feel it ourselves, in various ways. We can easily observe it in other people's bodies. For example, there is neurasthenia, which is weakness of the nervous system, an inability to accomplish things.

In his letter to the Church at Rome, Paul used a similar word, *asthenia*, that is the powerlessness in mankind to initiate true moral action. He can imitate goodness but is never able to do it. 'In me,' said Paul, 'that is, in my flesh, is no good thing.' Man of himself can do no good thing. He can do many things, but no good thing. It is terrifying at first for a man to find he is weak, morally asthenic. Then it is a relief!

That may sound very strange: but consider for a moment. Paul knew the paradox. 'When I am weak, then am I strong.' When I know I can do nothing. I rely not on my own powers, so called, but the power that works within us'. God is the true energiser.

Well, you might think, it's appropriate enough that this poor woman inspire such thinking in us: but what about her personally in the midst of her plight? Small consolation to her for us to utter these fine sentiments—and of course you would be right.

Jesus saw her condition. He saw her state, and what had caused it. He knew she had not only been struck down by ill-ness, but kept chained in it. The powers of darkness were not going to let their victim go free. They derived their own form of enjoyment from her anguish. More to the point, they delighted in keeping one in bondage who was a daughter of Abraham. It was that which moved Jesus also. So he cried out to her, calling her to him. We can see her

moving towards the low stage-like dais on which he was sitting. He said to her, 'Woman, you are freed from your infirmity!' That must have caused a bolt of silence to hit the room. People must have stared. The leader of the synagogue, an officer of no mean standing, felt the first rising of irritation within him. Who dared to do anything unusual on this day? Who called in question the level serenity of a Jewish Sabbath? Others craned forward, wondering what was to happen.

The woman herself—what did she think? Did she lurch, in her strange manner, towards that place where the teacher sat? Did she bow even more? Did she believe the words he had said to her? How often she had tried, in her weakness, to be normal, but it had never happened!

Not she, only, all over the world, all down through history, man has sought to hide the shame of his weakness, and to break out of his infirmity. He has longed to retrieve the nobility he has lost through shameful sins. He would like to do great exploits, not only for himself, but God. The congregation, looking at that woman, whether they realised it consciously or unconsciously, saw something of themselves reflected in her. How easy to hide your weakness, like the man with the withered arm, until Jesus asked him to come forward publicly, and to declare it in public. Publicly his shame was displayed. Publicly it was healed. Likewise the woman whose blood flowed to her shame. Privately she would be healed, but publicly he had given clearance from her womanly shame.

She felt his hands upon her, and the leap and surge of power, of new strength within her. There was no pain or anguish in lifting her body. 'Immediately she was made straight,' says the account. 'Made straight.' What a beautiful statement. A woman crushed by evil's onslaught—bowed to the earth, even to evil and suddenly, standing upright, and looking into the eyes of Messiah, the King of

the Kingdom.

Explosive intrusion into the serene Sabbath! Or was its apparent serenity merely the flat, dull monotony of repetitive, pointless ritual, a caricature of the true peace of God? Sedated by law, enchain'd by precept, and afraid of the power of life, many who were there felt that this intrusion was more than threatening. To the chief man of the congregation it was little less than blasphemy. He reacted without thought. He revealed his own dreary understanding of God. The dread shadow of law was over him, and he drew it across the congregation like a stifling blanket, a deadening cover which shut out the joy of life.

The words came from him, indignantly. 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.'

So it is out. She had come to be healed. Probably others had too. It was a custom wherever he went. They knew he would not teach without action. He just didn't have a system of concepts, but a living ministry, and this of liberation. Of course, right at the commencement of his ministry he had stood in another synagogue—in his little home-town of Nazareth, to be precise—and he had read the Scripture from Isaiah 61:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because He has anointed me to preach
good news to the poor
He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind.
To set at liberty those who are oppressed.
to proclaim the acceptable year
of the Lord.'

They knew that he healed. This woman had almost certainly had hope of that. She had remained there, drooped, in that synagogue, and he had seen her, and his compassion had gone out to her, so that he had called out. 'Woman, you

are freed from your infirmity.'

Then it had happened. She had felt his hands upon her. Healing went through her. The weakness left, and there came a surge of power. She stood up: as we said. 'She was made straight.'

'Jesus of Nazareth.' Peter later told the eager listening audience of Gentiles. 'who was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, and went about doing all manner of good, and healing all those who were oppressed of the devil.'

That was it: 'healed all those who were oppressed of the devil.'

For eighteen years she had been in this state. Hopelessness had been her lot. Unease at night, when trying to sleep. Shame, discomfort and deformity. And now she was healed! Surely the whole world would rise up with her, in this marvellous moment, and praise the teacher.

'She praised God.' says the gospeller.

'But the ruler of the synagogue was malignant...'

The fear of the unknown. The intrusion of power where there had only been lifeless observance. The shattering act of God, breaking into where men and women control their fine religion, and keep it within the bounds of decent deism. God is everywhere, no doubt, but let Him not be here in particular!

'On the Sabbath.' said the righteously indignant ruler. He must shepherd the good customs. 'If you must come for healing, come some other day. Work on the Sabbath? That is wrong!'

Thus he demeaned the glory of the act. He had put it alongside every other gimmick of man. Doubtless an unusual thing had happened, but of what significance was it, beside the great fact of the law'?

That was it: he had gone back to the law—to Moses. In his mind, perhaps the events of creation itself provided the precedent. 'In six days the Lord made heaven and earth. the

sea and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day. Wherefore the Lord blessed the seventh day and made it holy.'

On the sixth day He had made man. He had said. 'Let us make man in our own image.'

After the making, the special creating, a glorious creature had stood before Him. 'Thou hast made man upright'.

Jesus, too, knew about the events of creation: but he also knew the truth of it and was acting in harmony with that truth, bringing creation to its climax, displaying its glory— man, upright, in the image of God Himself.

Nor had God rested on the Sabbath day. 'My Father has always been working,' Jesus had said, 'and I go on working.'

He had said this on another Sabbath when he had healed a man who had been lying beside a pool, sick, for many years. He too could not stand upright. Jesus had healed him on the seventh day, the day of God's rest. But God had rested, not from labours, but from the work of creation. Now He was occupied with the work of providence, and, better still, the work of redemption. This many of the Jews had not seen, and Jesus wished to show them that the Father always worked.

Jesus had gone back beyond a law which had sprung from creation, to the creation itself, to the Creator Himself. For He had intended man to be upright.

The ruler of the synagogue was indignant, but his indignation did not match that of Jesus. 'You hypocrites,' the Teacher blazed out. 'You will loose an ass or an ox, that it may drink on the Sabbath, but you will not countenance the liberation of a daughter of Abraham.'

They were silent. Which is greater—an ass or a human, an animal or a daughter of great Father Abraham? She who is a daughter of Abraham must necessarily be a daughter of the Father Himself. Who would give greater worth to an

animal than a human person? Only a person bound in his own deadening legalisms.

Suddenly the miracle broke through to them all. The enemies of Jesus were stunned by his torrent of clear logic. Suddenly they saw the levels of their own deadening thinking, and they were ashamed. Perhaps it was because of the eyes that blazed, the unmasking of their banality, their minds filled with ritualistic trivia, their preoccupation with minutiae, their spiritual flea-hunting. Suddenly they were very small, shrunken little minds, and shamed in the vastness of the spirit of the Teacher.

The others—the friends, the expectant ones burst into great praise. 'They rejoiced in the glorious things that were done by him.'

And she was thinking. 'That is right! What he said is right. I am a daughter of Abraham.' Suddenly, perhaps, a victim of that great and capacious and loving bosom. Dear Father Abraham. Abraham's bosom. Can't get over it. Can't get trader it. Can't get around it.

The blessing of Abraham. The widening mystery of this Man who was the Messiah to come. He had set her free. Greater than Abraham, the Father Himself.

As yet she did not know the whole truth. This was the Son, come from the bosom of the Father, to make her straight and upright. No wonder the joy flooded her, and the praise swept from her lips, and the whole congregation joined in the marvel of it.

The teacher is no longer on the dais, but upon a throne. He is no longer subject to the indignation of the legalists, for he has broken through death, and reigns in life. Yet everywhere there are drooped persons, and jack-knifed spirits, and many who are weak, so weak. They cry, hating their weakness, but being in bondage to it. 'I cannot! I cannot!'

But Satan's bondage has been broken. The guilt of man which weighed him down, like a burden too heavy to bear,

has been borne.

‘When we were without strength, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.’

They are free from Satan’s domination. The years of imprisonment suddenly give way to the new era of liberation and freedom.

‘The Son shall make you free!’ ‘For freedom he has made us free.’

And we stand upright. As He created us. As, in truth, He has recreated us.

Sons of Abraham. Daughters of Abraham. Sons of God. Daughters of God.

Splendid. Upright. Noble. Regal, royal. serene, liberated. A Sabbath rest. An eternal Sabbath rest.

THE BEAUTIFUL SIGHT

To be honest he wasn’t all that prepossessing. His appearance was bedraggled. It was not just the long, straggly hair or the thin, pinched face. It was the effects of the drugs, and anyone who has had much to do with druggies knows those. There is a withdrawn look, a vague stare out of another world that is no real world. The vacuity is puzzling to the novice in these matters.

He was not, in fact, vague. He had come to talk about life. Whilst his hands were nerveless on his thighs, where they lay limply, yet there was a gleam in his eyes, and he was summoning up the faint resources of human strength which were his.

‘I believe in God,’ he said. ‘I didn’t believe in Him for some time.’ He shook his head as though to defeat recurring vacuity. ‘No,’ he half mumbled. ‘I guess I believed in Him then. It is just that I hated Him. I hated the things my parents stood for. I didn’t want that kind of religion.’

Our gaze met. ‘Was it really that?’ I asked. When he shook his head and admitted that it wasn’t, we coasted into better waters. It all poured out: the rigid faith of his family, the high demands of godliness, the unbending moral demands.

‘Sometimes they seem that way.’ I said gently, ‘and sometimes they are that way—godliness overplayed, love under-lived.’

He sighed. ‘Even now I am not too sure which,’ he admitted. ‘I’m too close to it all to be clear about it.’

I nodded. I knew how deep are family relationships and often how irrational. All loves tend to irrationality. especi—

ally family relationships.

‘And your dad.’ I asked. ‘how about him?’

The skin of his face was pale, almost translucent, another left-over of the drugs. A faint flush showed through it. ‘I guess I hated him.’ His voice was quiet. ‘Not just him.’ I said, ‘but God with him.’

He looked surprised. ‘It’s the authority thing,’ I said. We don’t want authority. To hate a father is to hate God. To hate God is to hate a Father.’

‘Never saw it that way,’ he said. ‘I just thought I hated Dad because I could never make it to perfection. They were always putting me on to achieve high ideals.’

‘That’s how most of us see God,’ I said. ‘We think He is a perfectionist. Our consciences—trained like that—trouble us. God is primarily love, and His grace goes along with His love.’

He seemed surprised. We talked for a long time of the ways in which love and authority, grace and rebellion, hatred and forgiveness, sonship and Fatherhood are related. He was quite stunned.

‘Do I read you correctly?’ he asked. ‘Are you saying that God is Father, that He loves me, and that I am wholly forgiven in Christ?’

The long sentence seemed to tire him. He was thin and weak. He had not been long off drugs: not enough, anyway, to be completely rehabilitated.

When I nodded we sat silent for some time. Outside the sun seemed fairly to hum amongst the stringy barks, where the creamy flower clusters churned over the shiny eucalypt leaves. Vividly coloured parrots sailed over the trees and one or two of them piped their high calls.

After a time he said very slowly, ‘God is my true Father. He loves me.’

I nodded. ‘That’s right. So you can love Him. Also you can now love your own dad.’ After a pause, I added. ‘And

your mum.’

Again the summer silence. He scarcely seemed to see the world about us. He was pondering deeply.

Then he spoke. ‘Right now, I love God.’

The pleasure stirred in me as it always does when this experience comes to a man.

‘I love Him as my Father, and I love His Son.’ He looked directly at me. ‘I love my own father now, and my mother.’

For a time we sat in silence, a pleasant silence in which there was tranquillity and peace, and a gentle underlying joy. Whittier’s words came to me: ‘The silence of eternity interpreted by love.’

After a time he sighed, very gently, and began his story. ‘I won’t trouble you about all the sordid things,’ he said. ‘You must have heard them so many times from so many people. Mine is the usual story, hating school, hating home, wanting something good of life, resentful at the limits placed on me. I was rebellious of course, as you have pointed out, never obeying anybody.

‘First it was sex. You think this will give you what you are looking for. Then you feel guilty and wrong, and you drift into drugs and alcohol. It becomes a weird mixture of all things—sex, drugs, the occult, strange Eastern religions.

‘You think that your religious trip places you above the regular moral guys. You see them as dull and ignorant. How would they understand Zen? How would they handle the cycles of life, the positive and negative powers of the universe? You drift about in states of semi-consciousness. Reality seems to be unreality and unreality reality. Words seem to fluctuate in their meaning.’

He paused, a little tired. ‘You seem to get behind. Also you feel the monkey on your back. Somewhere you are justifying yourself by criticising others, pouring scorn on their dull suburban ways, and you are vindicating yourself by your high-flown notions.’

He smiled as though it was all faintly ridiculous. But then, he explained, it had all seemed so important.

We talked on until someone brought us coffee and biscuits. He welcomed the coffee but ignored the food.

After a time he said. 'I'll tell you what happened.'

Now his whole body was alert, his cheeks pink again, and his eyes glowing.

'I must have been stoned properly, even while I was watching that T.V.' he said, 'because at first it didn't register, and then—all of a sudden—it did.'

'You might say I saw nothing, but then you would be wrong. I saw everything. I saw this young woman, and she was playing the guitar.'

A thin smile played around his lips. 'Don't get me wrong. She wasn't a Christian, not anyway that I would know. She didn't sing a Christian song. In fact it was an ordinary one. I don't even remember the words.'

He looked at me. 'She didn't turn me on sexually. None of that thought was in my mind. She was beautiful. Man, was she beautiful! She sang very beautifully. In fact she was exquisite.'

'I didn't want to touch her. I didn't want to own her. I just wanted to look at her. She was lovely.'

'Suddenly, something burst upon me and I was crying like a kid. I kept saying to myself, "She's beautiful! What she is doing is also beautiful. Someone made her like that. He must be incredible. He must be wonderful. What a mind He must have to make someone like that."'

His eyes shone as he looked at me. 'Suddenly I had a window on the whole thing of Creation. I saw in a flash that God must be good. He must be very wonderful to make a beautiful creature like that. !t was just all glory for me.'

He went on. 'For about two weeks I wandered everywhere. I touched no drugs, had no alcohol. People gave me food and I guess I ate some of it, but some thought I was

drunk. Well, in a way I was. I was intoxicated with God, with His creation. with His great powers. I had not seen it that way before.'

He paused and smiled dreamily. 'I guess I will never unsee what I have seen.' He murmured gently. 'Man. is God great, and is He good. and does He do beautiful things!'

I quoted gently, 'You have made everything beautiful in its own time...'

He stared at me with interest. 'Is that in the Bible?' he asked.

I nodded, and completed the quotation: '...and you have put the world into man's heart so that by searching he cannot find out the end from the beginning.'

'Marvellous,' he breathed. 'What a statement!'

We sat contemplating the beauty of creation. both outside on the wooded hill, and inside where two palpable creations of God considered His creatational greatness.

Finally he stirred. 'That is how I came to believe, and then all that brilliance of esoteric religion seemed very remote. It also seemed unnecessary.'

I was inadequate to comment.

'And now.' he said with a gentle smile, 'I find He is truly Father.' I nodded and echoed, 'Truly Father.'

He shook his head with happiness as though it could scarcely be believed.

'I think I am going to be intoxicated again,' he said.

I understood that and smiled. 'This is intoxication with the real, and not escape from reality.'

His eyes gleamed. 'Right!' he agreed, 'No escapism needed.'

We drifted down the stairs, out into the open, and he sat in his humble heap of a motor vehicle. It had come with him through many a strange trip. He seemed unaware of its battered appearance. He slipped the key into the ignition

socket.

The last impression I have of him is the thoughtful, contemplative look as he stared down at the ignition key. Then he looked up and said, 'Creator, eh, and at the same time, Father.' He shook his head with wonder. 'Fancy that, eh!'

Then he turned the ignition key. I could see him still shaking his head as he guided the stuttering, trembling ruin out of the drive and through the wide gateway. He did not even see my happy hand-wave. He was still shaking his head.

Later I heard he was studying theology. I liked that thought. I wondered how the lecturers would find him in his wholesome intoxication.

THE BOOK AND THE BOOKS

The man sat at his desk. Around him were his friends: in fact his study was, you might say, crammed with them. Often he would have a flesh and blood friend, and he would sit and talk to him or to her. Yet his other friends were to him no less flesh and blood, although many of them were dead and gone these hundreds of years. Some were still living. Very few of them had he met face to face, although he had seen a number of them on the lecture platform and such places. A few of them had been his mentors, and one very especially. Much of his life had been built around the teaching of this man, although these days his mind rarely dwelt upon that great master, for long ago his teaching had become an integral part of his life and thinking.

This day in particular, the man at the desk had a sudden appreciation of all his friends. He had been reading a particular passage which moved him deeply, even to tears of amazement, so that he stood up and walked around. He appeared quite agitated, but it was an agitation of joy mixed with the urgency to thank, and to go on thanking, his friends. He raised his arms upward, parallel with the sides of his body, his palms opened outwards, and said, 'My friends! My very good friends! I owe you so much, and I love you so deeply!' Having said that, he dropped his arms, looked downwards in reverence, and sighed for the joy that was his.

He muttered to himself, 'Where would I be without my friends?' Where indeed?

He remembered his friend-making of over fifty years before. As a boy he had come into the life of faith. For him

it had been dramatic—and no less dramatic than the famous occasion when Saul of Tarsus, a violent persecutor of the early Christians, had become Paul of Jesus, an ardent lover and follower of the Messiah. ‘True,’ the man thought, ‘little happened outwardly. As a boy I hardly changed at all on the outside, but within I was radically altered. I had a sense of cleanness, of lightness of spirit, and I knew life was so very significant. I knew then that the God of creation was also the Father Who liberated human beings from their various bondages. That is why I have always had a head start on people who do not know God.’

This dramatic conversion had helped to set certain of his life patterns. One of them was an inexhaustible thirst for wisdom. Knowledge, curiously enough, was not what he was out to get. Take encyclopaedia, for example. He could scarcely abide them. He almost had a fear of them, those silent volumes with their enormous wealth of information. For him, information had to be relevant, part of his immediate need to know, and then it had to be in the service of wisdom. Wisdom he knew to be that which helped a man to know where he was in the world, history, and his own thinking, and that which would give him direction in this thinking. He had somehow held to the idea that life was linear—along with time—and that he was travelling to some great goal. Tennyson, who was one of his great friends, had put it:

‘One God, one law, one element.
And one far off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves.’*

It was this thirst for wisdom which soon led him, still a grubby bushwalker, cricketer and adventurer, to walk the long miles to a neighbouring suburb during his Christmas vacation. He had his ‘Saturday money’ earned from mowing lawns and cutting lawn-edges by hand. He had collected bottles and sold them, and had even earned a little by the

sale of cow-dung. All that behind him. he had gone on an adventure. It was to Saunter’s old second-hand shop. They sold furniture for the most part, but there were other things on sale too, and he knew where to look. He headed for an old cedar cupboard with glass doors over the shelves. Behind these were his treasures. his books.

There were plenty of stories about Tom Mix; and there was Zane Grey who was one of his favourite authors. Dickens was too, although he was a bit of a tear-jerker. He had not long come into the exciting life of faith and did not dream that it had its own Tom Mixes and Zane Greys. So when he saw *Pilgrim Progress* by John Bunyan he was slightly wary. Old books did not excite him, at least not yet, but he opened it and began to read. Suddenly he knew himself to be in another world. He closed the book and set it aside to buy. Then he saw a title, *Cardiphonia: the Utterances of the Heart*. That could be exciting. It was by John Newton. At that stage he had not heard of a hymn called ‘Amazing Grace’, written by the same author, but it did not take him long to see that this man Newton had an experience of the heart very much the same as his own. He put that book aside, along with *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Now he was pulling out these old volumes thick and fast. One entitled *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M’Cheyne* really intrigued him. He expected to read about the bones, hair and dried organs of some character, but instead he found something very much alive, throbbing rather like his own heart.

He had looked at the prices and had concluded that they were within his range. He walked back the long miles with his purchases in his hands and joy pumping through him. His mother let him take his books and his midday meal down to the tree arbour at the end of the garden, and that

* ‘In Memoriam’ Stanza 36

was the day when he began to have friends of this new kind. Of course he had always had friends at school, at cricket, at footy, in stealing fruit from orchards, and in all the larks a young boy gets up to. These, however, were different: they were friends for life. Indeed, to him they were friends who brought life to him.

Not long before that he had discovered the Scriptures. Oh, he had read them with great zest! They were pure gold to him. Vast tracts of the text he did not understand, but he cared little about that. Much of it he did understand and he read avariciously. His family thought him quite idiotic and he accepted that, responding very mildly. They found it difficult to understand why he should immerse himself in a black-covered Bible, or musty old volumes. One of his brothers was deeply interested in the ages of the books. His comment was. 'I bet they are pretty valuable. You ought to keep them for a rainy day.'

Rainy days, fine days: it made little difference. They were all times for the gathering of his friends, who not only looked at things in much the same way as he did, but who added to his knowledge and aided him in wisdom. That is why, on this day when we first see him, he cannot contain his joy and gratitude at having them.

Not that he had always, easily, been allowed his friends. Take, for example, those early days of marriage, especially when he had decided to read theology. There was that very fine and sensitive wife of his who would allow him to slip by with a newly acquired friend under his arm. Her look would not quite signal reproach or despairing resignation; it would contain more of wonder. She recognised that he believed he needed these friends: she wasn't so sure that the need itself was valid. So with a half-smile, and sometimes a mild jest, she would allow him his purchases. She did not press his guilt in the matter, though undoubtedly he had a certain amount of it himself, mixed with his secret triumph.

Once he had succumbed to this guilt which had accumulated for years. Often they (he, his wife and the children) had had to struggle in the matter of finance. There had been post-war aid and assistance from the Government in his course, but they had to plan for every penny. However, he had become acutely aware that a rare volume is like a special tool which the artisan needs in order to perfect his product; it was anguish for him to leave such tools on a musty, dusty shelf. Perhaps the volume itself would disintegrate! He was very convincing in justifying his spending on them. Then suddenly all the guilt had come together—flecks and blobs of it which had been floating about for years—and he had come under deep conviction. The conviction had been compounded of two different elements. The first was that his flesh and blood friends (some of them) and certain of his enemies had lectured him about reading the Word and the Word only. 'Read the Word Itself,' they had said; 'don't just read about It.' That had sounded quite reasonable; even so he had remained uncertain. The second element was that he knew his friends—his books—had become an idolatry. Of that he was sure.

For these reasons he had a crisis in his life: he had surrendered his books to his Lord, as one who is a converted heathen surrenders his entrancing idols. He waited for days, expecting a pantechicon to draw up at his front door and empty his library. He had visualised the men coming in and packing his books into crates and boxes—there were so many of them—and then departing silently with them stacked in the large removal van. Nothing of this sort happened: the books remained on his shelves. He realised happily that all that was required of him was to cut the idolatrous umbilical cord—so to speak. Once that had been done he resumed a cleansed relationship with his old friends.

Of course he had still had to tackle the matter of 'reading about the Word, rather than the Word Itself.' That had

been quite a struggle. It entailed some nights of thinking, and some pacing the floor of his study. He would glance up from time to time at these old companions, and then look down at his Bible, wondering why it should be read without any assistance from others. Finally he came to the conclusion which he was to hold for the remaining decades of his life. He reasoned it something like this:

‘You, my friends, are my friends! So far as I know, most of you have been ardent lovers of our Lord, and eager students of his Word. You have had close relationship with the Creator and His wisdom. It is not just that He has spoken to you via His Word; through it, He, personally, has spoken to you, personally. That must mean that because He created you as a special and unique person (all persons are unique) then He has given you something which He has not given to all others, and perhaps to none other. Therefore I covet that aspectual understanding which you have and which I lack. Of course you may say the same for me: I too have certain gifts, and by them I may be of use to you. So then all of you, my friends, having read the same Word, have received differing insights and understandings, all of which are designed to profit those who care to receive them.

‘I perceive also that most of you are very dedicated people. You have received a calling in life and you sincerely believe you are fulfilling that calling. My calling is one amongst many, as also is yours. I read that “He has given some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists and some pastors and teachers”. Now all these teach, and although their methods do differ, the various modes clearly have God’s blessing.

‘When I think about it, no person in Old Testament days had Scriptures of his own. Indeed it took centuries to gather the various writings together. Even in the dynamic days of the early church they had only the Hebrew Scriptures which were read to them on the Sabbath. Had a person wanted to

carry them around for his personal use he would have required a barrow, so large and numerous were the scrolls! Again the members of the early church did not have the New Testament, for this had not yet been gathered. Given that here and there a Gospel was floating around, and certain churches kept the letters written to them by the apostles, the idea of the Word of God being only in writing would have seemed quite strange.

‘I take it, therefore, that now, as then, it is valid for men to share the insights and understandings they receive through their life of devotion, worship, study and Godly living. What the early preachers said was called “the Word of God”; the same may also be said for more modern preachers—provided, of course, that they do not swerve from the truth, and do not commit the error of saying that theology is the truth itself. Theology is our way of seeing and formulating the truth, but as such is not the truth, any more than a road directory is the roads it indicates!

‘Of course I will continue to read the Scriptures directly for myself, but then I will not despise the thoughtful examination of the text, the heart-reception of its message, and the revelations which others have had from the same passages. In fact I will ‘covet their fellowship, their aid, and their insights, for these things are not under the laws of copyright. All men belong to all men, and that goes for their thoughts, their understanding, and their wisdom, since all things come from God.’

With that choice he had set himself to be undeterred by the rather superficial idea that one should not be taught from books, when in fact all lay themselves open to be taught by the words of men’s lips. Uttered or written, what is the difference? It would be inconsistent and sheer folly to reject, on principle, a word which was written, but receive the same word if it was spoken.

Having concluded all this he nevertheless agreed within

himself that whilst he accepted most of these writings on his shelves as the works of friends, and so saw them as his friends, yet he had a yardstick by which he assessed their value or otherwise. He was not so naive as to think that because human beings produce books that they are necessarily always correct in what they write. From his own experience he knew that we all have motives for writing. Some motives are good—the highest of all is love—and some are not good. One can write to prove oneself, to win applause, to be accepted, to secure oneself in history; such motives are not good. He knew that probably few if any ever wrote from selfless motives. Even so the grace of God could—and did—use such writings. One then had to screen out the elements which were suspect and receive the good. Sometimes one might sieve a whole book and find only the tiniest grains of gold. Even so it was a worthwhile endeavour. Other times one found that there were tares sown with the wheat. Such books were difficult to read with discernment, yet long ago he had learned that true men and women have a monitor of truth placed within them. Given time, thoughtfulness, and contemplation they can detect what is true and what is false.

For this reason he kept books on his shelves which did not always agree with what he believed. For some, such possessions might be dangerous, but he was not afraid of them. He knew what treasures lie in the nooks and crannies of men's minds. Some come upon thoughts and ideas which are gems, and yet despise them, opting for the gleam and glitter of baubles which they then seek to sell to the highest bidders. For himself, he saw the gold under the old encrustations and tarnished objects. This was part of the truth-monitoring which he had received as a divine gift. He had once read in the Word, 'All things are yours,' and also, 'To the pure in heart all things are pure'. From then on he had known how to screen out the impure and refuse to be cheated of gifts which came from the most unlikely places.

Having been told to love his enemies, he also decided that they could be his friends, even though he retained his caution as to the value of their words and writings.

See, then, that a man may be most rich in this world, though relatively poor in its natural goods. He never forgot his Bunyan, his Newton and his M'Cheyne. They too remained on his shelves, for he owed much to them. He never thought of himself as having gone beyond these friends, but rather thought of himself as living with others in addition to these. They formed a noble company. Somehow, no matter the time or the need, one or other met his requirements. This is how it would happen:

He would be preparing a particular theme or passage and what he understood would seem fair enough but somehow lacking. Right at that point, via his books, he would suddenly discover a new and inspiring insight. He would not leave it at that but receive its evocation with joy, and being stimulated would go on to further thrilling insights. Finally he would find a whole new world of thinking opening up to him. He was sensible to know that true thinking issues in true wisdom, and both of these in true living. Thus he was no mere theoretician. Everything was measured by the yardstick of active living, or rather, active living had to issue from the wisdom he had learned. So in this way he was grateful to his friends.

There were times when he could scarcely bear the sight of these arrayed companions, when they looked like regiments in their row upon row of upright volumes. Then their titles did not attract him. He knew for the most part what was in them, but they gave him no joy. Suddenly some of them seemed dull, others academic, and yet others deeply involved in areas of thinking and truth which were miles away from his present interests. Even so he did not reject these old

friends, but knew they would be there in a day when he would again take them down and be immersed in their help and fellowship. It was still always the case that amongst them all was someone who could help him, and gradually wean him from his present adverse mood. There would be an intuitive touch, an awakening, an evocative renewal, and life would begin its flow again.

Most times he would be open to all they had to say to him. Then he would be amazed at the depths of their thoughts. A contemplative person, he measured the value of the truth by the way it related to human living, and the way it served the human race. Himself a God-centred person, he demanded that all revelations finally be to the worship and glory of God. He was impatient with materials which were primarily man-oriented. Anything which led away from God was suspect. Not that he demanded religious thinking as such; he knew enough of that to see it as ultimately man-centred anyway. But he loved the depths that men could plumb of the elements of truth, especially as they heard it directly from the Word which God had spoken and man had inscripturated. Although on the one hand he always saw himself as a beginner, on the other he saw himself being soaked in a superb wisdom. This came out in his dealings with God, man and creation. He was habituating himself in a practical sagacity.

There were special times when he had deep need of his friends. These were the times when anger and hurt and disappointment came. He expected nothing of mankind. He had come to terms with its depravity. He knew its degradation, but he also knew the surprising truth of its glory. When men did evil things he was not surprised, nor was he disappointed and angry. This was how man had become: let us neither condone nor reject man became of it. Let us see

him as he is; that was his attitude. But what did trouble him was that men and women of faith were so often critical of their own, harsh towards them, and on occasions betraying them. He had been the object of such criticism and betrayal himself. These times were the most difficult, and before he was aware he would move into anger; such anger is dangerous since it so easily turns to bitterness and spoils everything.

The most difficult of these times were when old friends, and old enemies also, would set on him, scoffing at his theology, criticising his practice, and seeking to undermine his ministry. Whilst he could say he sought no reputation for himself, he was nevertheless grateful for the vocation he had been given. It troubled him therefore when others called it in question. He sought to avoid reacting to criticism on the one hand and giving way to it on the other, for he had strong convictions concerning the truth, and was aware that many criticisms were not genuine, and many attacks arose out of anger, jealousy or even an underlying knowledge that what he said was true. In these times when he would have had these folk embrace and not bludgeon him, he would go to his writer-friends. He would say to himself, 'Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps, after all, despite my joy at what I thought to be the truth, I am nevertheless wrong!' It was a fearful thought to ponder, but he tried to ponder it in honesty. Even at this late stage of his life he could change—he was prepared to do that. Yet how could he unless he were proved to be basically wrong?

It was here his friends were of wonderful help. It might be in the late night or very early morning that he came to them. There they would be on his shelves, and he knew just where to go. The real friends—the authors themselves—were, most of them, gone long ago to glory, and dead as this world counts death. But their words were very much alive. They spoke to him as person to person, friend to friend.

They gave out of their wisdom and it was the 'reason of the heart' as Pascal put it. That is not to say that it was a reasoning of the emotions, although these were men and women of deep affections. Under the light that hung over his desk or that bent over his couch he would listen to their words. All the truth would come tumbling back to him, and reassurance would be warm and strong. He would feel him self even more convinced than before, and indeed fired to proclaim the truth as of old, but with yet more vehemence and appeal, and exhortation. He wondered how he would fare without such friends. Probably they would never know what they were doing. Some of the living ones may have thought their works to be unread, and some who had once lived in this world would have longed to be told that their thoughts were so helpful to another. Whilst their words were available to him and others they too would always be alive

That was what gave him courage, now, as he sat at his desk. He too was a worker in words, an artisan in sentences, a person skilled in paragraphs. He loved the sound and shapes and evocations of words. He knew them as powerful agents of the truth. Somewhere behind the decadent human man, and the depraved heart, was a knowledge of the truth. With words he could strike chords, with ideas he could inspire, and with promises of God he could inflame souls. Oh, it was a very beautiful and very powerful matter—the Word and the words! This was why one day the idea broke in upon him to tell others about his friends, and to confess them before men: to give praise where it was due, and recognition to the sources of his own wisdom.

As he began writing, typing and rattling away on his machine, he really wondered whether he could convey all this. He hoped he could, but he really did wonder!

EPILOGUE: THE CHARACTER

I woke at nigh on two. It was the low hour of the night, or, more accurately, morning. Sleep had been tangled with my dreams, but then it had been deep and sweet, for the memory of the dreams would not come.

But he came, fresh and pert as you like. He was a merry composite of all that I had wanted him to be. He was caught in a web of his own choosing. He was bright with life as he had always purposed to be.

He had dreamed of the high and the serious. He had espoused nobility as a dream and as an ideal. He was poetic, furrowing down to where the old ache is healed by a deeper sweetness, a dreaminess which banished the bleak and etches constant contrasts which grip the spirit.

In the early morning I was sure I had him. My own spirit was so strong. All the weariness was gone. Sleep, like a strengthening and reviving heart, had renewed my courage. I had faltered in past years. Each time I met him he would be heady, incorrigible, mouthing the bit, impatient at the leash, flicking away before I could handle him firmly.

Many times I had sought to turn him from this and that, making congruity with my own mind. Each time he would give everything a new turn, tugging away from where I would have him be. His spirit was bright, doubtless, but there was rebellion also, a rejection of what I thought he was and should be. So he would decide his own action, determine his own patterns of living, and although they always started from where I found him, they never conformed to my desires and plans for him.

Nor was he alone in this. How could he be? His life was interwoven with others. In some way he also determined their lives, but they too were independent, autonomous, always deciding how they would have the action. Because of this my hold over them was tenuous. Indeed it was virtually *non est*. What I determined they rarely agreed to be, and even less under his urgings, for he worried them out of any agreement in spirit. He kept at them, telling them it was not my place to decide either their fate or destiny.

Mind you, it was not always disappointing. True, I had planned how he should be and they should be. I had plotted the matter, letting it first gestate in the mind, later seeking to give birth to it all. Vagrant things happened even in the pregnancy, and worked out their own post-natal elements. Nevertheless this was fascinating, for it proved the authentic being, first of him and then of them.

Partly I was to blame. How can you dare (or hope) to determine plot-lines? How can you decide this and that action, or this and that destiny? Often it is because you will not give them time—these persons and their circumstances. They are as sensitive as children who are unattended by their busy parents. They refuse to conform to patterns thoughtlessly planned or rigidly set. They insist upon their own integral dignity. They demand honour. They make certain that their discrete personhood is seen for what it is. All in all they are truly human, always insisting upon their uniqueness as persons.

It is with him I become angry. It is he who causes frustrations. I work at him and on him in so many ways. I also ring the changes in person. Sometimes I drag him on the auto biographical journey, but he escapes. Of course he is I, as I am him, although I will not admit to this, for he fails to fit the image I have so insistently created. Occasionally I address him in the second person, in which case there is no response. He wriggles, squirms, looks at the sky or stares

past me.

I revert always to the third person. If I have any control it is in the realm of this third person. However he rarely sub mils and when I override him, bullying him (and his friends) to my modes of thinking, I am inevitably filled with remorse. I have to let him be, and so I rewrite those descriptions. In this case he is mollified, and in these times his gratitude at my repentance gives him a gentleness and a studied consistency of character.

Secretly I love his vagrant ways. It surely must be that when he is suddenly different, or acts in unusual ways, that I recognise myself. Sometimes it is with alarm. Often it is with surprise or distaste, but often, also, it is with immense joy as when he pulls off some great action, or decides some powerful event. I marvel at the sheer joy which comes when there should be harsh anger or sullen resentment. It is not just cussedness or precocity which causes this. He is simply being true to himself, as also he is helping others to live congruently with what they are.

This morning seemed so different. I mean I was so different. When I began tapping the keys in my sound-proof study, he came under my thumb, so to speak. Indeed he came under every tapping finger I used. I was amazed and delighted. Nor did I feel I was forcing him my way. I was puzzled at his delightful acceptance. It was sheer joy to see him fit in with a natural plot-line.

My purpose in describing all this is to explain that his originality had never really been perverse. Viewed over many years he has always emerged as perfectly consistent with himself. Of course when you think of it, how could he be other than that? I realise now that I have always come to him and his friends with some sort of determinative egoism. I want what I wish to emerge. I see my ideas as stunning. Also I see myself as creator, that is to say I 'god' the situation. All nature cries out against that. What seems perversity

is really only protest. It is in fact insistence upon basic integrity.

This particular morning taught me—when I looked at it in retrospect—that I was really one with him. I was refreshed, total, seeking no applause for my originality. He did not oppose me because in fact I was not demeaning him. I was letting him be, yet even more I was actually helping him to be. You could say this action was exercised in love and humility, an element most rare in me, and perhaps as rare in other writers.

It is thus that a whole new world has opened up to me. I see that you can—indeed *must*—*let* him be, and thus let others be. I suppose I have known all the time, deep down, that my endeavours to manipulate him have been my determination to reform him, hold him to given goals, and demand given performances. That he should be me, or I him, or he my dream for me had never consciously entered my compacted cranium.

Since that morning I have been laughing hugely, and with great delight. I let him be, and I let myself be, and the experience is enriching. I also have spasms of fear, sometimes anticipating disaster and the like. Of course this must be—disaster. I mean. Greatness does not lie in unthinking conformity. It may, however, lie in simplicity. Here it may even become profound.

I leave my narrative here, having made a deep confession. With this new love of him and his fellow characters we should all have a good time.